

BEHIND THE BRONZE DOOR



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Thoroughly frightened, she turned away as the sound of the wierd knocker shattered the ghostly stillness.

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THREE OWLS EDITION

BEHIND THE BRONZE DOOR

BY
WILLIAM LE QUEUX

AUTHOR OF "THE VOICE FROM THE VOID,"
"MADEMOISELLE OF MONTE CARLO"

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BEHIND THE BRONZE DOOR

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CHAPTER I.

THE EPIDEMIC OF MYSTERY.

"ISN'T this terrible, Henry? Where is it going to end?"

"Isn't what terrible?—and where is what going end?"

"Why! Haven't you read to-night's paper?"

"No."

"Here it is; read that!" and handing her husband the *Evening Herald* Mrs. Hartsilver indicated with her finger a paragraph in the "stoppress" headed: "Another Society Tragedy," and stated that a well-known baronet had been found shot in his bedroom in circumstances of great mystery.

Certainly the series of tragedies which had taken place during the past eight months in what is called "Society," had been most puzzling.

First, Lord Hope-Cooper, the fifth peer, held in high esteem by all his friends and acquaintances, owner of Cowrie Park in Perthshire, Leveden Hall in Warwickshire, and one of the finest houses in Grosvenor Square, had drowned himself in the beautiful lake at Cowrie, apparently for no reason

and without leaving even a note of farewell for Lady Hope-Cooper, with whom he was known to be on the best of terms—they had been married eight years.

Then Viscount Molesley, a rich bachelor of three-and-twenty, an owner of thoroughbreds and well-known about town and in sporting circles, had been found shot in his bedroom one morning, an automatic pistol on the floor beside him, and in the grate the ashes of some burnt papers; apparently he had shot himself after receiving his morning letters.

Following close upon these tragedies had come the sudden death of the Honorable Vera Froissart, Lord Froissart's younger daughter, in mysterious circumstances. She had been found dead in the drawing-room in her father's house in Queen Anne's Gate, and at the inquest the jury had returned a verdict of "death due apparently to shock." Then the death of a rather notorious ex-Society woman, Madame Leonora Vandervelt, who had been divorced by three husbands—she had thrown herself out of a fourth-floor window at a fashionable West End hotel. Then the death by poisoning of an extremely prosperous stockbroker of middle-age, owner of two financial journals. And after that four or five more tragedies of the same nature, the victim in nearly every case being a man or woman of high social standing and large income.

"Exactly the way Molesley made away with himself," Henry Hartsilver observed dryly as he laid

down the paper after reading the report of the discovery of Sir Stephen Lethbridge's body in his bedroom at Abbey Hall in Cumberland.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You may think me hard and unsympathetic, my dear," he went on, addressing his wife, "but these people who make away with themselves leave me cold. Such tragedies don't excite my pity—they arouse in me only a feeling of contempt."

He paused, then continued:

"Now, look at me. *You* know how I began life, though I sometimes try to forget it, as I hope others do. My parents were poor, and I received only a moderate education; but I had grit and determination and I won through. And look at me to-day. All who know me look up to and respect me. I'm a self-made man and not ashamed to own it, though I don't crow about it on the housetops as some of these plebeians do. Though I come of the people, I pride myself on being one of Nature's gentlemen, and what can you want more than that—eh? We can't choose our parents, or I might have chosen parents like yours, my dear—blue blood through and through. And that was one reason why I married you. I think I have told you this before. I made up my mind when I was still a lad that the woman I made my wife should be a lady in the true acceptance of that often misapplied word, and the first time I met you—you remember that day, eh, my dear?—I recognized the type, and then and there I decided that you were the lady for me!"

He lay back in the big arm-chair, slipped his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, and looked at his young wife with an expression of extreme self-satisfaction.

"But, Henry," she said, wincing, "what has all that to do with this calamity? You forget that I knew poor Stephen Lethbridge. Abbey Hall is close to my old home, and Stephen and I were children together. I can't help feeling upset."

"I understand that quite well, but the feeling is one you ought to fight against, my dear Cora. A man who deliberately commits suicide, no matter what his social status may be, and no matter what the reason or reasons may be which prompt him to commit the rash act, is guilty of a grave wrong, not to himself alone, but to the whole of the community. Heaven knows I have had difficulties, almost unsurmountable difficulties, to contend with in my time, yet the bare thought of self-destruction never entered my imagination."

Henry Hartsilver had been married three years. A common, self-centered person, endowed with exceptional shrewdness and with considerable commercial acumen, he had begun life as a jerry-builder in a small country town. Then war with Germany had been declared, and realizing at once what so many failed to realize, namely that such a war must last for years at least, Hartsilver had seized the opportunity he saw spread out before him of amassing money quickly and in large lump sums by securing by divers means building contracts for our Government.

Thus, long before the war ended, he found himself a rich man. Then, anxious to gratify his second ambition, he set to work to look about for a woman of good social standing to become his wife; the thought that any woman to whom he might propose might decline the honor of marrying him did not occur to him.

Consequently he was not surprised, nor did he appreciate the honor conferred upon him, when the only surviving daughter of a well-connected country gentleman accepted his offer of marriage. True, the war had reduced her already impoverished father almost to penury, and in addition both her brothers had been killed in action early in the war, so that when she accepted him she felt that she did not now much care what became of her. Her mother had been dead many years, and her father she literally worshipped. What she never admitted, even to herself, though in her heart she knew it to be the truth, was that by marrying Henry Hartsilver she would be able to provide her father with a comfortable income in his declining years. And since his sons' death he had aged very rapidly.

Hartsilver was now in his forty-sixth year, his wife just seven-and-twenty. They had no children, but that did not prevent Hartsilver's everlasting complaint to his wife that he considered himself deeply aggrieved at the Government's neglect in failing to confer a title upon him.

"Just think, my dear," he had said to her more than once, "what you would feel like if I made you 'my lady!' Shouldn't we be able to crow it

over our friends, eh? And to think of the sums I gave to war charities! Well, we must live in hope!"

Fortunately his wife's tact, possibly also the sense of humor which she possessed, prevented her from becoming annoyed with him when he spoke like that, and making the sarcastic rejoinder which she sometimes longed to utter. Though she could not accuse herself of having married him for his money, that being the last thing she cared about, she yet felt that she had in a way married him under false pretenses, for certainly she knew that, but for her anxiety to add to her father's happiness and comfort, this common, self-satisfied, and self-righteous person was one of the last men she would have linked herself to for life.

Presently he spoke again.

"You know, my dear Cora," he said, linking his fingers across his ample chest, "although of course, it distresses me that you should grieve for this man Lethbridge, yet I don't quite appreciate your feeling what I can only suppose is a sort of affection for the fellow—you, a married woman. Somehow it seems—it seems not quite the right thing. A woman, when she marries, should have no thought for other men, at least of all thoughts of a—er—friendly nature. Now, consider for a moment, and tell me if your better nature does not tell you so itself."

Cora Hartsilver winced, but her husband did not notice it. He did notice, however, when a moment later she smiled.

"You seem amused, my dear," he said dryly. "May I ask what amuses you?"

"Oh nothing, Henry, nothing at all," she answered quickly, then bit her lip. "It was only something I happened to think of just then."

"Ah, then it was something. Then why say it was 'nothing?' You should always be truthful, Cora, always absolutely truthful, in even the smallest matters. And what did you 'happen to think of just then?'"

"I can't remember now. It's gone. Anyway it was nothing of consequence. May I have that paper again, Henry?"

"Certainly," he answered, shrugging his shoulders. Then, as he handed it to her, he said:

"Tell me what you know about Sir Stephen Lethbridge. I know him only by name."

"Well, I have not seen him for a year or two," she replied carelessly. "Indeed, I think not since our marriage. He came to the wedding, if you remember."

"I don't remember. But go on."

"He was in the Gunners. He went out to France in 1914, and was home on sick leave when we were married. He used to be rather fond of me, I believe."

Henry's mouth opened. He stared at his wife in astonishment.

"Really, Cora——" he began, but she went on without heeding him.

"I heard not so long ago that he had got into

rather a bad set. Somebody told me that the things he had seen out in France seemed to have unsettled his brain—I know that happened in other cases too. But he was a man who would never, I am quite sure, have done anything dishonorable. Oh, I wish I knew,” she exclaimed, carried away by a sudden emotion. “I do wish I knew what made him kill himself!”

“I wouldn’t worry about him, my dear Cora, if I were you,” her husband remarked coldly. “Probably he was mentally unsound, mad—‘potty’ as the boys say. Those scenes in the trenches must have been extremely trying. And yet—had I been younger and able to join the colors——”

He stopped and stared. Cora, lying back on the settee, was laughing hysterically.

CHAPTER II.

HUSBAND, WIFE—AND ANOTHER.

CORA HARTSILVER was preparing to go out next morning, when she was told that "Miss Yootha Hagerston would like to see her."

"Oh, ask her to come up!" she exclaimed. "And Jackson——"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"If Mr. Hartsilver should come in while I am out, he had better be told that I shall not be in for lunch."

"Yes, ma'am."

Jackson, the maid, went downstairs with a look of mild amusement in her eyes. She had been in the Hartsilver's service two years, and was fond of expressing her opinion to the other servants on the subject of what she called her master and mistress's "*matrimonial mésalliance*."

"I give them another year," she had observed to the cook only the night before, "and that will see the end of it. However a lady like her came to marry that—that old woman of a husband of hers fair beats me."

"Not so much of the 'old woman,'" the cook had answered sharply—she showed signs of age herself. "But I do agree with you, Mary, nevertheless. Ah, well, the old feller's got the money-bags,

and that goes a long way when it comes to marryin', I always says. I never did hold with these love and cottage matches, nor I never shall. I've had some of it, I can tell you, and I have told you before now, but seein' as my poor old man lies in Carlisle churchyard, *nil nisi bonus*. Isn't that how they put it? And he had his good points for all he was poor as a rat, that I will admit."

Yootha Hagerston was one of Cora's oldest and dearest friends, the one friend, indeed, of whom she had for years made an intimate confidant. Yootha was not married, but that was not due to any lack of suitors, for the proposals she had had were numerous. She was a very pretty girl, about two years younger than Cora: tall, slim, extremely graceful, and with a face full of expression. She was one of those girls who attract through their personality rather than by the beauty of their features. The look in the large intelligent eyes betrayed her temperamental nature. She lived alone in an unpretentious flat near Knightsbridge, which she had taken two years before, after leaving her home near Penrith owing, as she put it, to the "impossible sort of life my people expected me to lead, boxed up in the country and with nothing on earth to do." The truth was that her stepmother disliked her, and that her father was intemperate. Yootha was the youngest of three children; her two brothers were serving oversea.

When she entered Cora's bedroom, Cora came forward and kissed her fondly.

"You dear thing," she exclaimed. "I am so glad you have come. I have not seen you for a week. Where in the world have you been?"

"Oh, my people have been in town. You know what that means."

"Indeed I don't! Your people? You mean your father and mother?"

"Stepmother, if you please," Yootha corrected. "For goodness' sake don't insult my mother's memory. Yes, they both came up unexpectedly, and for what do you think?"

"I give it up."

"To try to persuade me to go home!" and Yootha laughed merrily. "Can you see me back in the old homestead with its memories of my happy childhood's days, and by contrast the atmosphere which prevails there now? No, thank you! And why do you think they wanted me back again, Cora?"

"Oh, stop asking conundrums."

"Because some busybody has been telling my father that the way I live in my bachelor flat is not *comme il faut*, if you please, and so he thinks—or says he thinks—that I may end by bringing the family name into disrepute. Just think of that! Now, if you ask me, I will tell you what I believe the true reason is. On my twenty-fifth birthday I come into some money from a defunct aunt, my father's only sister—quite a nice little sum safely invested—and I am pretty sure my stepmother hopes to induce me to make over a portion of the nest-

egg to her, or to my father. You have no idea how amiable she was, and my father too. Couldn't make enough of me or do too much for me. The money comes to me in five months' time."

"But didn't they know before that you would inherit it?"

"Apparently not. I knew nothing about it myself until a few weeks ago, and I purposely didn't tell you then because the lawyer who wrote to me—he is a friend of mine—asked me to say nothing about it just yet. He told me about it more or less in confidence—said he thought I might like to know."

"So you are not going back to Cumberland?"

"My darling Cora, what a question!"

"Oh, I am glad!" Mrs. Hartsilver exclaimed. "I don't know how I should live if you went away. You are the only friend I have; you are, really. Tell me, did your father or mother—I beg your pardon 'stepmother'—say anything about Stephen Lethbridge? You have read about the tragedy, of course."

"Indeed I have, and I at once thought of you. Yes, they were full of it last night. My father said he saw Stephen less than ten days ago, and was struck by the change that had come over him."

"How—'change'?"

"He said he looked years older than when he saw him a month ago, and he mentioned the fact to my stepmother at the time. Then he said that strange-looking people had been staying at Abbey Hall lately."

“Men or women?”

“Men. There were rumors, too, my father said, that Stephen had become financially embarrassed.”

“Really? But he was so well off, or supposed to be.”

“I know. That adds to the mystery. I suppose there was a woman, or women, in the case. I see in to-day’s paper that an inquest will be held.”

Cora did not answer. She was staring out of the window towards Regent’s Park—the house was in Park Crescent—with troubled eyes, as though her thoughts were miles away.

“Don’t fret, Cora,” her friend said at last. “I know you were fond of him, and that he was fond of you, but——”

“Oh, don’t, don’t speak like that,” Mrs. Hart-silver exclaimed hastily, pressing her fingers to her eyes. “It is all too terrible, I can’t bear to think of it; and yet I can’t help thinking about it and wondering—wondering——”

Yootha Hagerston encircled her friend with her arm, and kissed her warmly.

“I know—I know,” she said in a tone of deep sympathy. “No, we won’t talk about it. Did Henry refer to it at all?”

“Henry!”

The tone betrayed utter contempt, almost hatred.

“Oh, yes, Henry referred to it all right. At least I drew his attention to the report in last night’s paper, and—oh, you should have heard him! I felt I wanted to scream. I longed to strike him. He has no heart, Yootha, no sympathy for anything

or any one. I wonder sometimes why I go on living with him. He said he felt only contempt for any man who took his life, no matter in what circumstances!"

Like many another, Henry Hartsilver had succeeded in supplying himself with petrol during the war, and as his limousine sped slowly down Bond Street a little later that morning with his wife and Yootha Hagerston in it, officers home on leave who noticed it wondered if people at home actually realized what was happening on the Western front.

"More profiteers' belongings!" a captain in the Devons, limping painfully out of Clifford Street, observed grimly. "I sometimes wish the Boches could land a few thousand troops here to give our folk a taste of the real thing. Who's that they are talking to? I seem to know his face."

For the car, after slowing down, had stopped owing to the traffic congestion, and a tall, good looking, well-groomed man who could not have been more than seven-and-twenty, had raised his hat to its occupants and now stood on the curb, talking to them.

"Know him!" the officer's companion answered; he was a gray-haired man who looked as if he had been a sportsman. "Probably you do know him—I wonder who doesn't. It's Archie La Planta, one of the most popular men in town, some say because he's so handsome, but I expect it's largely because he is such a good matrimonial catch."

"Why isn't he serving?"

"Oh, ask me another, Charlie. Why are half the youths one meets not serving? They've managed to wangle it somehow. Haven't you ever met him?"

"Not to the best of my recollection. You see, I've been in France three years. But I am sure I have seen him somewhere."

"Here he comes. I'll introduce you. He knows everybody worth knowing, and is quite an interesting lad."

La Planta was about to cross the street, when he caught sight of his friend on the pavement, hesitated an instant, then waited for his friend and the wounded officer to come up.

"'Morning, Archie," the man exclaimed who had told Captain Preston who La Planta was. "Preston, let me introduce Mr. La Planta."

The two men bowed formally to each other.

"Archie, who are those two ladies to whom you were talking, if you don't mind my asking?" his friend said a moment later.

La Planta told him.

"You must have heard of Henry Hartsilver," he added. "You won't find a list of contributors to any public war charity in which his name doesn't appear—mind, I emphasize the *public*. Mrs. Hartsilver is his wife, a charming woman."

"Oh, that bounder," the first speaker observed. "Yes, I know all about him; one of our profiteers!"

"Exactly, and a quite impossible person in addition. Which way are you going?"

The three progressed slowly, owing to Preston's

limp, along the pavement, in the direction of Piccadilly. Preston hardly spoke. He was almost morose. The reason was that La Planta's personality repelled him. Why it repelled him he could not explain. It was one of those natural repulsions which all of us have experienced regarding certain persons, and that we are at a loss to account for.

"Where are you both lunching?" La Planta asked as they approached Piccadilly.

"Nowhere in particular," Preston's companion, whose name was Blenkiron, replied.

"Well, why not lunch with me at the Ritz, and I'll introduce you to Mrs. Hartsilver and her friend. They have promised to meet me there at one o'clock. It is about the only place where one can get anything decent to eat. You will find both ladies charming."

It was then noon, and La Planta, saying that he had an appointment at his club, left them after arranging that they should all meet at the Ritz at one.

"I am not attracted by the fellow," Captain Preston remarked some moments later. "I would sooner have lunched with you alone, George. Who and what is he?"

Blenkiron shrugged his shoulders.

"What he is, we know—a man of leisure and of fortune. Who he is, whence he comes . . . ?"

He made an expressive gesture.

"And, after all, what does it matter? Who knows who half the people are whom one meets

everywhere to-day? They can afford to do you well, they do do you well, and that is all that most people care about. Though 'La Planta' is not precisely a British name, the man looks, and evidently is an Englishman. He has a great friend, indeed, two great friends, who are almost always with him. Profane people have nicknamed the three 'The Trinity.' One is a man called Aloysius Stapleton, the other is a young widow—Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson, a perfectly lovely creature; heaven knows what her dressmaking bills must come to."

"Or who pays them?"

"Charlie, that is unkind of you, what the women call 'catty.' Why should we conclude that she doesn't pay her own bills?"

"And why should we conclude that she does? Well, I shall be interested to meet Mrs. Hartsilver at lunch presently. I don't think I have ever before met the wife of a profiteer."

In spite of the Food Comptroller's regulations, the luncheon supplied at the Ritz lacked little. It was the second day of our great offensive, August 9th, 1918, but a stranger looking about him in the famous dining-room, where everybody seemed to be in the best of spirits and spending money lavishly, might have found it difficult to believe that men were being shot down, mangled, tortured, and blown to pieces in their thousands less than two hundred miles away. Captain Preston thought of it, and of the striking contrast, for that morning he had, while at the War Office, listened on the telephone to the

great bombardment in progress. And that perhaps was the reason he looked glum, and why he was, as Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson afterwards remarked to La Planta as they drove away together, "a regular wet blanket right through the whole of lunch."

Aloysius Stapleton, though not distinguished-looking, was one of those men who, directly they begin to talk, rivet the attention of their hearers. Forty-two years of age, he did not look a day over thirty-five, and in addition to being an excellent conversationalist, his knowledge of men and women was exceptional. He had traveled several times round the world, or rather, as he put it, zig-zagged over it more than once. He appeared to possess friends, or at least acquaintances, in every capital in Europe, also in many American cities and in far-off China and Japan. The only country he had not visited, he observed that day at lunch, was New Guinea, but he meant to go there some day to complete his education.

"Were you ever in Shanghai?" Preston inquired carelessly, looking him straight in the eyes across the table. As this was only the second time Preston had spoken since they had sat down to lunch, everybody looked towards him.

"Yes," Stapleton answered, meeting his gaze. "I was there twice, some years before the war."

"I stayed there several months in 1911," Preston said, "and I believe I met you there. Your face seemed familiar to me when I was introduced to you just now——" he was about to add that he

had just remembered it was in Shanghai he had seen La Planta before, but he checked himself.

"Were you there in the autumn, and did you stay at the Astor Hotel?" Stapleton asked.

"I did, and in the autumn."

"Then no doubt we did meet, though I can't at the moment recollect the occasion."

For a couple of seconds the two men looked hard at each other. It was rather a curious look, as though each were trying to read the other's character. The conversation was changed by Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's saying suddenly:

"What is everybody going to do after lunch, I wonder?"

And then, as nobody seemed to have any fixed plans, she went on:

"Why don't you all come to a little party I am giving? Just a few intimate friends. We shall play bridge, and several well-known artists will come in later and have promised to sing. It would be nice of you if you would all come."

There was a strange expression, partly cynical and partly of contempt, in Captain Preston's gray eyes as Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson stopped speaking. The sound of the terrific slaughter which he had listened to an hour or two before, and which must be in progress still, he reflected, rang again in his ears. And here in London, in the London which, but for the heroism of our troops and their allies, and the unflagging watchfulness of the nations' navies, might already have been running in blood,

these people, especially Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson and her friends Stapleton and La Planta, seemed to have no thought except for amusement and for themselves.

"Good heavens," he muttered, as presently they all rose from the table. "I wish the Boches could get here just to show them all what war and its atrocities are like! Well, perhaps they may get here yet."

The only member of the party who had really interested him had been Cora Hartsilver, and that was due perhaps to the fact that La Planta had told him that she had lost her brothers in the war. Yootha Hagerston, too, he had rather liked; the "atmosphere" surrounding both these women was quite different he at once realized, from the "atmosphere" of Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson and the men who, so Blenkiron had told him, were her particular friends.

And yet, before he had been long in Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's beautifully appointed house in Cavendish Square, its luxury and the sense of ease and comfort the whole of her entourage exhaled began to have its effect upon him. He was not a card-player, but music at all times appealed to him intensely, and as he lay back among the cushions in a great soft arm-chair which Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson had specially prepared for him, and listened with rapt attention to Tchaikowsky's wonderful "None but the Weary Heart," sung with violin obligato, those thoughts of the horrors he had witnessed "out

there," which so perpetually haunted him, faded completely from his mind, and even the dull, throbbing pain in his injured leg became for the time forgotten.

At last the music ceased, and he became conscious of conversation in subdued tones at his elbow. The speakers were late arrivals, and as he caught the name "Hartsilver" his attention became focused on what was being said.

"A terrible affair—and his wife over there, talking, knows nothing about it as yet."

"When did it happen?"

"About midday. It must have been premeditated, because when he was found dead in his bath he had opened an artery with a razor."

CHAPTER III.

THE HIDDEN SCANDAL.

DURING the nine months which had passed since Henry Hartsilver had been found dead in his bath, many things had happened. The war was over, and people were already beginning to forget the discomfort, for some the misery, of those five long years. In London the wheels of life, their spoke having been removed, were slowly beginning to revolve once more.

The thousands who had "done their bit," and become impoverished in consequence, were many of them cursing the impetuosity which had led them to forget their own interests in their anxiety to help to avenge the outrages in Belgium and France, and to save their own country from possible disaster. On the other hand many thousands of men and women who before the war had been struggling small traders, now contemplated with a feeling of smug satisfaction their swollen bank balances, and, while thanking heaven there had been a war, began to adopt a style of living which, though it ill became them, gratified their vanity enormously.

"I 'aven't reelly decided if me boy shall go to Eton or to 'Arrow," was the observation Captain Preston had overheard while inspecting cars at the motor exhibition one afternoon in late April, and

the remark had made him metaphorically grind his teeth. For he detested the war profiteers as a race almost as deeply as he hated "conscientious" objectors. Indeed, since the war had ended he had regretted more than ever that the Huns had failed to land here.

The London season was now beginning, and the traffic congestion in the streets was admitted by all to be greater than at any period before the war. Enormous cars blocked the main thoroughfares, sometimes for hours at a time, yet everywhere was talk of poverty among people of education and of culture, who a few years previously had been in good circumstances. And among the many rich people in the West End few now entertained more lavishly than Aloysius Stapleton and the man who seemed to be his shadow—young Archie La Planta.

"Then you have decided that it shall be at the Albert Hall," Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson said as she thoughtfully blew a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling, "and you want me to act as hostess? Well, I won't."

"You won't? But why not?"

"It wouldn't do, Louie," she answered with decision, addressing Aloysius Stapleton, who, seated near her on a settee in the drawing-room in her house in Cavendish Square, had been discussing arrangements for a great *bal masqué*.

"I really can't see why; can you, Archie?" and he looked across at La Planta.

"You wouldn't," Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson said

dryly, before La Planta could reply. "I think men are the dullest things, I do really. Though our many 'friends' profess always to be so fond of us, and so pleased to see us, any number of the women hate me, if the truth were known."

"They are simply jealous."

"It's the same thing. I know the things they have said about me, and that they say still. Or if they don't say them they imply them, which is worse. No, I refuse to be your hostess; also I consider you ought to get somebody of more importance, some woman of established social standing, of high rank, if you want the ball to be a big success. There are plenty of people who do like me, of course, but at least they know nothing about me, who I am or where I come from, and though that may not count with the majority of men and women in our large circle of acquaintance, it counts a good deal with some—they become inquisitive after a time and start making inquiries in all sorts of directions. Mrs. Hartsilver and her friend Yootha Hagerston are making inquiries of that sort now. Do you know that they have gone so far as to instruct a personal inquiry agency to find out all about me?"

"I did hear something of the sort," Stapleton said. "But why worry? There is nothing it can say against you."

"You mean the agency?"

"Yes."

"But it can invent things, and readily will if it thinks it worth while."

"Lies can't be proved to be truth," La Planta said, who for some moments had not spoken.

"Indeed!" Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson exclaimed with a little laugh. "Perhaps when you grow older you will change your opinion," she added. "You are more ingenuous than I thought you were, Archie!"

There were several visitors present, and soon conversation drifted to other topics. After a little while, however, somebody inquired, turning to Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson:

"You were speaking some minutes ago of Mrs. Hartsilver. Was anything ever discovered about her husband—I mean, why he put an end to himself?"

"I believe nothing. If anything had been discovered I should probably have heard, as I know many people who were friends of his. A verdict of 'suicide while temporarily insane' was returned at the inquest, if you remember."

"Yes," the woman who had inquired said thoughtfully. "Yet he was one of the last men one would have looked upon as insane. I should have called him absolutely 'all there.'"

"You never know," Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson replied, pouring out a cup of tea. "People one considers sane seem nowadays to go mad in the most astonishing way. Look at the terrible list of suicides during the last year of the war, beginning with Lord Hope-Cooper and Viscount Molesley. Of course Madame Leonora Vandervelt's tragedy was

not so surprising—she had had such a remarkable career—but poor Vera Froissart's suicide gave us all a terrible shock."

"You knew her intimately, didn't you?"

"My dear, she was one of my closest friends. And the jury pretended that she had died of 'shock!' Girls of that age don't die of shock. My belief is that she had some private love affair and—but there, I must not say more."

"You don't mean that?"

"Indeed I do. And my suspicion is not based on supposition only. Soon after her death I heard definite rumors, which emanated from trustworthy sources."

"How dreadful! I hope they didn't reach her father."

"I hope so too. He looked dreadfully altered when I met him the other day, but Vera's sad end no doubt accounts for that."

A minute or two later the visitor with whom Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson had been conversing rose to go. Other visitors followed her example, among them La Planta.

"I am dining to-night with Mrs. Hartsilver," he said carelessly as they shook hands.

"Oh!"

A look of sudden interest had come into Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's eyes.

"You will tell me if she says anything about me?" she added hurriedly under her breath.

"Of course I will. Shall I see you to-morrow?"

"Do. I shall be shopping in Bond Street in the morning. Why not meet me at Asprey's at twelve?"

"I will. By the way, Captain Preston inquired for you this morning, when I met him in Regent Street."

"Captain Preston?" Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson repeated with a puzzled look. "Who is he? I seem to remember the name."

"Don't you recollect my introducing him to you about nine months ago? We all had lunch together at the Ritz—Louie was there, and Mrs. Hartsilver and Yootha Hagerston, and afterwards we went on to your house to play bridge and listen to music, and so on."

"Of course, now I remember perfectly. A deadly dull person, wasn't he?"

"He had been badly wounded and was only just out of hospital. You will find him less dull now, I think."

"Possibly, but I am not very anxious to renew the acquaintanceship. He is one of the people one prefers to drop."

"He wouldn't like to hear that," La Planta answered with a laugh. "It struck me he was greatly attracted by you that day, but tried not to show it."

"Then don't tell him," Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson said lightly. "Good-by then—and twelve to-morrow at Asprey's."

As Archie La Planta stepped into his car strange thoughts came to him. They were thoughts which

would have astonished most of his friends, though not Stapleton or the friend whose house he had just left.

At his chambers in the Albany he rang for his servant.

"James, bring me some telegram forms," he said as the man entered. "And where is my 'Who's Who'?"

For some minutes he studied a page in "Who's Who" carefully. Then, when James reëntered with the forms, he said:

"And now I want 'Debrett.' Why don't you leave my books of reference where I always put them?" he added sharply.

"Mr. Stapleton looked in this morning, sir," the man answered, "and wanted your 'Who's Who' and 'Debrett' in a hurry, to refer to; said he hadn't time to go home, sir. So I let him have them and he left them on the piano."

For some moments La Planta sat at his *escritoire* writing out two telegrams.

"Send these off at once, James," he said to his servant, who stood waiting at his elbow. "Both are very important."

Then, going over to the full-length mirror, he carefully lit a cigar in front of it, set it going, and stretched himself out in a long *fauteuil* with his back to the French window.

He was soon deep in thought.

Suddenly his reverie was interrupted by the sound of the door-bell ringing.

"Hullo, Preston!" he exclaimed, as a moment later the footman announced the captain, who came limping into the room. "This is a pleasant surprise. Come and sit over here," and he rolled an armchair towards him.

"Thanks," his visitor answered. "I hope I am not intruding?"

He let himself slowly down into the big chair, then laid his stick beside it on the carpet.

"I wanted to see you rather particularly, La Planta," he said, when they had exchanged one or two commonplace remarks. "So I looked up your address in the 'Red Book' and came along. I tried to get you on the telephone, but the operator declared she could get no reply."

"She always does," the young man answered dryly. "I have been seated beside the telephone at least half an hour and the bell has not even tinkled."

"So much the better, perhaps, as I have found you in. Now, what I want to see you about is Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson."

"Yes? I was at her house less than an hour ago."

"Do you mind if I ask if you know much about her—who she is, where she comes from, and all that sort of thing? Please don't think me inquisitive. You may think it cool of me to ask you this, but I have a reason for wanting to know."

"Naturally, or you wouldn't ask," La Planta replied quickly.

"I believe she is a friend of yours."

"I believe she is. Do you mind telling me, Preston, the reason you need the information?"

"Not in the least. A friend of mine, Lord Froissart, whose daughter died suddenly over a year ago, tells me that his daughter was rather intimate with Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson, but knew nothing about her—that is to say, who her parents were and so on. His daughter's death has rather preyed upon his mind, and he seems to suffer under what I take to be a delusion that Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson could throw some light on the cause of death if she chose. Consequently he has been worrying a good deal about the lady, and, when I dined with him last night, he asked me as a particular favor—I am an old friend of his—if I would try to interview you on the subject, and ask you to tell me Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's past history, if you know it. I said I would, though it is not a task I greatly relish as I am sure you will understand."

La Planta did not answer for some moments.

"Yes, Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson was a great friend of Vera Froissart," he said at last, "and I don't suppose any of Vera's friends was more upset at her sudden death than Mrs. Robertson was. The astonishing delusion you speak of—Froissart's apparent belief that Mrs. Robertson has some knowledge or suspicion of what brought about the tragedy—is, of course, the result of an unhinged mind. As for my telling you Mrs. Robertson's private history, though I quite see how you are placed,

I consider that to go into a family affair of that sort would, under existing conditions, be a breach of confidence on my part. Also, what bearing could such knowledge have on Mrs. Robertson's knowing why Vera Froissart ended her life, as she undoubtedly did? Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson is a friend whose acquaintance I made some years ago under rather romantic circumstances, and to you I don't mind saying that she has made me her rather close confidant. This I can tell you, however—she is a woman who has from first to last met with many misfortunes, and been persistently misunderstood."

For a minute both men were silent.

"And is that all you are prepared to tell me about her?" Preston said suddenly, in rather a hard voice.

"That is all."

"In that case, La Planta," Preston bent down to get his stick, "perhaps I had better go."

"Perhaps you had."

The wounded man looked up quickly, as though something in the young man's tone had stung him, and their eyes met. It was little more than a glance which passed between them, yet the swift transference of thought from each to the other warned Preston to be on his guard against this polite, suave youth who was popularly said to be the most sought after bachelor in London; and in the same way La Planta knew on the instant that before him stood a man who might, under certain conditions, prove a formidable adversary.

"Good afternoon," Captain Preston said, as he put on his hat in the hall.

"Good evening," La Planta replied with frigid courtesy.

Then James, who had returned from the telegraph office, opened the door and the captain limped slowly up the Albany towards Vigo Street.

By the time Preston reached Regent Street, Archie La Planta had succeeded in getting through on the telephone to Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson, and was telling her what had just occurred. When he stopped speaking, he heard her give a gay little laugh.

"Didn't I say this afternoon," she exclaimed, "that he was one of the people whose acquaintance I preferred to drop?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE BRONZE FACE.

THOUGH Archie La Planta had met Cora Hartsilver frequently since the Armistice, he did not know her intimately, and had therefore been rather surprised at her asking him to dine. He concluded that she must be giving a dinner party, so when on the evening Preston had called to see him, he arrived at the big house in Park Crescent, he was astonished to find that Yootha Hagerston was to be the only other guest. Then and there his quick brain began to act and, while carrying on light conversation with the two ladies, he kept asking himself what reason Mrs. Hartsilver could have had for inviting him.

She had an excellent cook who had been with her since her marriage, and the little dinner was irreproachable. La Planta, an epicure to his fingertips, had realized this at once, and towards the end of the meal he began to feel at peace with the world at large.

"It is awfully good of you to have invited me to a nice, friendly little dinner like this," he remarked presently, looking his hostess straight in the eyes across the table. "I don't like big dinner parties, you know, and was half afraid you might have a lot of people to-night."

"I never give big dinner parties if I can help it," Cora answered, "though one has to sometimes. Like you, I prefer an informal little gathering, just one or two friends with whom one can exchange ideas. So many people are colorless, don't you find? And dull people bore me to death. Let me pass you the port."

It was '48 port which had belonged to her late husband. La Planta poured himself out another glass, and presently his gaze became fixed upon the widow. It had never struck him before, he thought, what a pretty woman she was.

"When are we going to see your charming friend again?" Yootha presently said carelessly. "I do think her so attractive."

"Which charming friend is that?"

"Why, Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson, of course. Who else could it be?"

At once La Planta was on the alert. The words flashed back into his partly bemused brain: "Mrs. Hartsilver and her friend Yootha Hagerston are making inquiries about me now. Do you know that they have gone so far as to instruct a personal inquiry agency to find out all about me?"

Could that be the reason he had been invited to dine? Were they going to try to find out from him something about Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson, though perhaps with greater tact than Preston had displayed?

He pulled himself together, and answered:

"I am sure Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson would like

to meet you at any time." Then he added as an afterthought: "Though she has many acquaintances, she has comparatively few friends."

"Do you think she would dine with me one night if I invited her?" Mrs. Hartsilver asked quickly. "We have met only casually."

"I am sure she would. She is not one of those people who stand always on ceremony. Like most people who have traveled, she takes a broad view of life."

"Oh, has she traveled a lot?" Yootha asked. "How interesting. Tell me—where has she been?"

"Rather you should say, 'Where has she not been?' She has been almost everywhere, I believe."

"I do think she is lovely, don't you?" Yootha persisted. "If I were a man I should be head over heels in love with her."

"Some men are," La Planta answered in an odd tone. "But she doesn't care about men, I think. I mean in a general way."

"Did you say she had been in China?" Yootha suddenly asked abruptly.

"I didn't—but she has been. She was in Shanghai a good while."

"She is a widow, I am told," Cora presently hazarded.

"Yes."

"Did you know her husband?"

"No. He died several years ago."

"But you have known her a good while?"

"Only a year or two."

"Is she entirely English? I sometimes think——"
"Yes?"

"I was only going to say she sometimes gives me the impression that she has a foreign strain."

"If Australians are 'foreigners,'" La Planta said lightly, "then she has a 'foreign' strain, because her parents were Australians—they were sheep farmers in Queensland."

"You don't say so. That no doubt accounts for the queer expressions she sometimes uses. They were rich people, no doubt."

"Well off, I fancy, but not enormously rich."

"Then her fortune, I take it, came to her from her husband?"

La Planta had been answering more or less mechanically, for the wine he had drunk had dulled, to some extent, his ordinarily keen intelligence. Now, all at once, he seemed to become alive again.

"You seem greatly interested in Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's private life, Mrs. Hartsilver, and you too, Miss Hagerston," he said suddenly. "Oddly enough a man you know, in fact it was I who introduced him to you, called to see me only an hour ago for the express purpose of cross-questioning me with regard to the same lady. Merely a coincidence no doubt, but a singular coincidence."

His tone, as he said this, resembled the tone he had adopted whilst addressing Preston, though it was not quite so marked. Mrs. Hartsilver and Yootha Hagerston winced nevertheless, and presently they changed the subject.

He joined them in the drawing-room about ten minutes later, and half an hour or so afterwards took his departure rather abruptly. Though he had drunk more than was good for him, he knew he had not said anything that he would wish to recall. He walked leisurely down Portland Place in search of a taxi, then decided to walk home.

In Regent Street, as he passed into the halo of light shed down by a street lamp, he came face to face with Stapleton.

"Why Archie," the latter exclaimed, "I was just thinking of you. Aren't you dining with Mrs. Hart-silver?"

"I was," La Planta answered, "but she and Yootha Hagerston rather bored me, so I came away early."

"Wasn't it a dinner party?"

"No, only those two."

"Only the two! Then why were you invited?"

"I don't know, but I think I can guess. Come along home with me. There are one or two things I want to talk to you about."

At first Stapleton hesitated, alleging that he had an appointment, but finally he decided to do as his friend suggested.

Two telegrams lay awaiting La Planta in his sitting-room, and after reading them he handed them to Stapleton.

As Stapleton read the second, he raised his eyebrows.

"Curious, isn't it?" he asked.

"I think not. I expected as much."

"Won't it upset your calculations?"

"Not necessarily."

A tantalus and syphons stood on the table. Without saying more, Stapleton mixed himself a brandy and soda. Then he took a cigar from La Planta's box.

"One or two things have happened lately," he said at last, "which rather puzzle me. And the last is why those women should have asked you to dine alone with them."

"No puzzle about that," Archie answered, then went on to explain how Mrs. Hartsilver and Yootha Hagerston had obviously tried to pick his brain regarding Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson and her past life.

"Strange," Stapleton said thoughtfully. "That fits in with something that was said to me within the last hour. You know that little Jew who lends money to his friends—Levi Schomberg?"

"By name."

"I know him only slightly, but we walked along Jermyn Street together just now—he was bound for the Turkish baths—and he warned me to be on my guard against 'Hartsilver's widow'—said she was a 'designing woman,' as I might presently find out, and added that she was trying, for a reason which he stated, to get a case up against—well, you can guess whom."

"What sort of case?"

"A scandalous case. So, putting two and two together, I can only suppose that Cora Hartsilver

is either jealous of our friend, or that for some reason she bears her a grudge."

For a little while they continued talking.

And, while they talked, interesting events were in progress not far away.

"The house with the bronze face," as it was called by people living in the neighborhood, was situated in a quiet street just off Russell Square. It had acquired that curious appellation owing to its front door being made conspicuous by a huge old Florentine bronze knocker representing a woman's laughing face. The face was really that of a bacchante, and a very wicked-looking bacchante at that, and many were the stories told about the house in consequence. Some said the woman's face possessed a lurid significance, and that within those portals . . . Another rumor often credited was that the face could cast a spell over those who sought to probe its history, and that on more than one occasion persons who had entered the house had never come out again.

Those were, of course, foolish legends, yet the fact remained that an atmosphere of mystery surrounded the house with the bronze face. Obviously at some period it had been a private residence. Now it was ostensibly the headquarters of a private inquiry agency which had sprung into existence shortly before the war, and was known to be patronized by many fashionable and rich people.

It was nearly midnight, and in a comfortably furnished office in the middle of the building, so

that no light showed in the street outside, a venerable-looking old gentleman and a handsome young woman, the latter with a semetic cast of countenance, sat side by side examining some documents.

A shaded electric reading-lamp on the table gave the only light in the room, and the documents lay in the ray which it shed immediately in front of them.

Neither spoke. Both were working rapidly. First the old man would take a document off the pile, read through it carefully, then pass it to his companion, who, after quickly scanning its contents, would make a marginal note or two, and then docket it. Thus they continued in silence for over half an hour, when the pile of papers came to an end.

The man leant back in his chair, stretched himself, and yawned.

"We have had about enough of this, eh, Camille?" he said, turning with a curious expression to his companion.

"Not half!" she answered with a foreign accent, which made the slang sound quaint. "*Après minuit,*" she added, glancing at her wrist-watch. "I call it crewel."

"Never mind; it can't last," he said. "Or at least it won't if I have much to do with it. Give me one of your chipre cigarettes."

She took a cigarette herself and lit it, then handed him her case.

The room in some respects resembled a boudoir rather than an office, but hung on its walls were

charts marked with colored chalks. In all there were eight of these charts, and below each was a row of numerals. At one end of the room the framed portrait of a dark man with curly hair and a waxed mustache, a man obviously a foreigner, stood on the overmantle. In a corner near by were stacked twenty or more japanned tin boxes which might have been deed boxes, though none bore any name, while at the opposite end, close to the window, were several luxurious fauteuils, a comfortable settee, some occasional tables and Chippendale chairs. No sound of any sort found its way into the room.

The man rose in silence, and began slowly to pace the floor. Suddenly he stopped.

"This case interests me a good deal, Camille," he said at last. "I feel sure she must have married the man."

"*Naturellement*," the woman answered with a shrug. "And now she wish—how you say—to be rids of him?"

"Rid of him, not 'rids.' But why?"

"*Ma foi*, you ask me one more. He has much money, *hein*?"

"It would seem so, judging by the sums he spends."

"*Alors naturellement*. What else?"

"But proofs of the marriage have to be obtained, or she doesn't get the money."

"Oh, the proof can be obtained. I obtain him."

"And what if——"

He stopped abruptly. Both looked quickly towards the door. For some moments neither spoke. No sound broke the perfect stillness.

"*Qu' est-ce que ca?*" the woman asked in a nervous undertone, putting her hand on his arm. Both were still staring at the closed door.

"Wait, and I will see."

He rose, but the woman clutched him.

"No, no," she exclaimed hoarsely, "you must not go out there!"

"Indeed, I must, and I am going."

He tried to shake her off, but she only tightened her hold.

"If you must—here," and as she spoke she produced from under her skirt a small automatic pistol, pressed forward the safety-bolt, and slipped the weapon into his hand. Then she released him.

Noiselessly he stepped across the room on the thick carpet, placed his hand carefully on the door handle, turned it very slowly and gently drew open the door.

As he did so a streak of light, as if from an electric torch, shone into the room. The old man hurried out on to the landing with wonderful agility, but the light had vanished. He switched on the electric lamp at the head of the stairs. Nowhere was anybody visible.

Glancing quickly in every direction, and with his finger on the trigger of the automatic, he crept cautiously down the stairs. Presently the woman, who had now ventured a little way down the stairs

after him, heard him moving in the hall. Soon she heard the spring baize door, which opened on to a passage leading to the kitchen quarters, open with a squeak, then shut with a dull thud.

For a minute she waited, hardly breathing. There could be no doubt that somebody besides themselves must be in the house. Yet how could anybody have entered, seeing that since early in the evening both front and back doors had been securely bolted and locked?

She was trying to summon courage enough to follow her companion, when a sound just behind her made her turn with a cry of alarm.

CHAPTER V.

BEHIND THE DOOR.

A TALL, slim man of aristocratic appearance, dressed in a tweed suit and with his hat on, stood at the head of the stairs. He had a walking-stick in his right hand, in his left an extinct electric torch.

"I think you will remember me, Madame Lenoir," he said quietly.

The woman stared hard at him for a moment, then a look of recognition spread over her face.

"Ha, Milord Froissart!" she exclaimed in a tone of relief. "Ha, but you frightened me, you frighten us both. But how did milord come in? And what is it you want so late at night?"

"I want to see your partner, Alix Stothert. Why has he gone downstairs?"

"To see who might be there, milord. We thought we heard somebody in the house, so he go down to search about. And it was only you? Then why did you not say?"

"Because when he opened the door I saw a pistol in his hand, so I thought he might shoot before he recognized me. Listen, I hear him."

The baize door in the hall had opened and shut again, and Stothert now stood at the foot of the stairs, looking up in amazement.

"Lord Froissart!" he exclaimed. "Well, of all the wonders!"

He came quickly up the stairs, and a minute later the two men and Camille Lenoir were together in the room from which Stothert and his companion had just emerged.

"This is a most perplexing thing," Stothert said, as he pushed a chair towards the 'visitor.' "I wish you would tell me, first of all, how you got in, Lord Froissart."

"Certainly. I came to see you this afternoon about six o'clock, and when I arrived at the house I found the door open—some workmen were attending to your electric light in the hall. I walked in, meaning to come up to your office, but I went a floor too high, took a wrong turning off the landing, and found myself in a passage along which I wandered until I came to a door which I opened and passed through, still trying to find your office. It is a heavy mahogany door, and as I shut it behind me the handle came off in my hand. While trying to refit the handle I accidentally pushed the metal stem through the socket in the door, and at once I realized I was a prisoner, for the passage led into a room from which there is no other outlet."

He paused a moment, and then continued:

"When I found it impossible to open the door by any means, I hammered on it with my stick, and shouted. In fact I made all the noise I could, but apparently you didn't hear me."

"Certainly we did not," Stothert answered. "That room is a long way off, and there are several doors between it and the landing. How did you get out eventually?"

Lord Froissart held out his walking stick.

"With the help of this," he said. "In desperation I finally set to work to grind the ferrule square by rubbing it on the hearthstone in that room—I fear I have disfigured the stone, but that, of course, I will make good. It was a long job, I can assure you—and it ruined my stick. Here, take your torch," he added with a laugh, as he handed it to him.

Stothert and his companion looked considerably relieved.

"A most unfortunate mishap," the former remarked, with a quick glance at the woman. "And you gave us quite a fright," he added. "We thought burglars had broken in."

"Well, I thought so too, for some minutes," Froissart said lightly. "Do you always work as late as this, if it is not an impertinent question?" He looked about the room. "I see you have been hard at it."

"No, we rarely work late, but to-night we had on hand rather an urgent matter. And may I ask, m'lord, what you wished to see me about when you came here this afternoon? Oh, excuse me, you surely must be hungry after your long imprisonment—I feel that indirectly I am to blame for the mishap. Camille," he turned to the woman, "go and see if you can find something for Lord Froissart

to eat. I am afraid m'lord there is not much in the house."

"Please don't trouble about food on my account," Froissart urged. "I really am not hungry, and the blunder was my fault. And now, with regard to the matter I wanted to see you about. You remember, of course, the sad affair of my poor daughter's death?"

"Quite well. The papers were full of it, which must have caused you pain."

"It did—great pain. It seems to me that the newspapers have no consideration for people's feelings—they have no delicacy, no mercy."

"I fully agree with you."

"Well now, in spite of the jury's verdict that my daughter died of shock, it must have been patent to you, and I fear also to others, that the poor child took her life. Why she should have done so has puzzled me ever since, for I can think no reason which might have prompted her to do it. She had, however, a friend, I may say a great friend, of whom it now appears that nobody knows anything except that she is apparently a very well-to-do woman. Strange rumors concerning her have been repeated to me of late, and putting two and two together, it seems to me possible that this friend of hers might, if she wished to, be able to solve the mystery. Now, why won't she? Can you tell me that?"

"Who is the woman, m'lord?" Stothert asked. "Anything you tell us will, of course, be considered private and confidential."

"Yes, please consider this private. The woman you will probably know. Her name is Mervyn-Robertson." Stothert and his companion exchanged a meaning glance. "Ah, I see you do know her," Lord Froissart said quickly.

"Indeed we do, m'lord, that is to say, by name. We know a lot about her."

"And is what you know favorable, or is it—er—the other thing?"

"Certainly 'the other thing.' More than that we must not say. And so you wish us to find out who and what she is, where she comes from, and so forth?"

"If you can."

"That will not be difficult. Already we can tell you that her birthplace was Australia; also that her parents were sheep farmers in Queensland."

"Oh! That sounds quite respectable."

"It sounds respectable, but . . ."

"Yes?"

"Things, you know, are not always what they sound. Are you likely, m'lord, to attend the big ball to be given at the Albert Hall on the twenty-ninth of this month?"

"I had not heard of it. Who is giving the ball?"

"Mr. Stapleton and Mr. La Planta, though I believe they don't themselves know who will act as hostess. They are friends of Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson, as you probably know."

"Yes, I have heard of them, though I don't know them personally. I recollect we happened to speak

of them when I came here to consult you about my poor daughter's death. I hoped then that your wide knowledge of what is happening privately among well-known people soon might succeed in throwing light on the cause of that terrible tragedy, but unfortunately you were not able to do so. And now tell me—why do you wish to know if I am likely to attend this ball? Surely you must know that I never go out now?"

"It might be to your advantage, m'lord, to do so on this occasion, though why it might be I must not tell you yet. More, m'lord. I would, if I may, urge you to attend it."

"Of course if you think it will serve some good purpose, Stothert."

"I don't merely think so, I am almost sure it would. I believe it might indirectly help us in our investigations concerning Miss Froissart's strange death."

"In that case I certainly will go."

"And you will advise us in advance of the costume you will wear? Please don't fail to do that. A mask and fancy costume are to be obligatory, I hear."

When Lord Froissart had gone, Stothert and his partner breathed more freely. It was true that their "firm" calling itself the Metropolitan Secret Agency, had obtained a wonderful reputation for getting secret information about people's private lives, but rumors were rife regarding the methods it employed to achieve its aim. Women of high station, anxious to rid themselves of their husbands;

husbands desiring to prove their wives' alleged infidelity, and many others, now almost invariably went straight to the Metropolitan Secret Agency, or "the house with the bronze face" as Society people too had come to call it, and generally within a week the Agency would put them in possession of enough indisputable evidence to damn the suspected party irrevocably and forever.

Certainly the amount the Agency knew about the private lives and affairs of more than half the peerage was astonishing. How they came by it all was a problem which rival agencies tried in vain to solve, and, having failed to solve it, some would proceed to vent their spleen by spreading false stories concerning the house with the bronze knocker, its inmates, and the way the business carried on there was conducted.

Not that either Stothert or his French partner cared in the least what was said about them. As the former was fond of remarking: "They can say what they like about us, but they can't prove the truth of even a single statement."

As Lord Froissart drove homeward in a taxi, his thoughts became centered on the house with the bronze face, and its strange tenants. The Metropolitan Secret Agency had been in existence less than three years, yet already it was looked upon as the premier inquiry agency in London. Though it never advertised, everybody in Society knew of its existence, and the rapidity with which it supplied information, which was invariably accurate, was common talk.

Then, who were Stothert and his companion, Madame Camille Lenoir? He had been told that they had come to London together and started their strange business without friends or introductions. Had they other partners? And if so, who were they? Madame Leonora Vandervelt, the beautiful adventuress who had committed suicide by throwing herself out of an hotel window, had been convicted on each of the three occasions she had appeared in the divorce court on evidence supplied by the Metropolitan Secret Agency. Twice the well-known Society woman, Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson, had visited the house with the bronze face with reference to thefts of some of her valuable jewelry, and each time the thief had been caught within a fortnight. Then her friend Stapleton when his Fiat car was stolen while he was choosing shirts at Wing's in Piccadilly—this fact mentioned in Court created some amusement—had gone direct to Bloomsbury and interviewed Alix Stothert, with the result that both car and thief had been traced to Llandudno, and the thief arrested there while actually in the car.

That and a dozen similar examples of the Metropolitan Secret Agency's amazing efficiency occurred to him, and the more he thought about the Agency, the more he marveled. Another question he asked himself was why the Agency should have rented that big house in Bloomsbury, seeing that their offices in it occupied apparently no more than four rooms, the rest of the house being in consequence empty and waste space. When he had lost himself

in the house that afternoon he must have wandered, he reflected, into a dozen rooms or more, not one of which was even furnished, though nearly all had carpets. On the previous occasion when he had visited the Agency, he had seen six or eight clerks apparently hard at work, but the only people in authority were Stothert and the rather common Frenchwoman.

And the more he thought, the more puzzling the problem seemed to be. Not the least astonishing thing was that the partners should have found it necessary to continue working so late at night after probably working hard all day. He had, like most people, heard rumors about the house, including the story that people were seen to enter it who never came out again, but to such legends he paid no heed. He had just asked himself if it might not be advisable to deal carefully with this man and woman who treated him always with so much deference and outward courtesy, when the taxi drew up at his house in Queen Anne's Gate.

CHAPTER VI.

CORA HARTSILVER'S CONFESSION.

THOUGH Yootha Hagerston had now inherited the little fortune left to her by her aunt, she had not thought it necessary to change her mode of living, or even to move from her flat near Knightsbridge into more expensive quarters, as one or two of her snobbish-minded acquaintances had told her they supposed she would do.

Of late she had, however, changed in some ways, as many people had noticed. She seemed pensive, at times quite *distracte*, and this gave rise to various conjectures among her many casual acquaintances. By some it was hinted that "there must be a man in the case," though none could think who the man could be, as Yootha was not by any means fond of men's society; on the contrary, she often freely admitted that the conversation of most young men, and even middle-aged men, bored her considerably.

"Yootha Hagerston will never marry—mark my words," a woman who had known her "since she was so high," observed sententiously one day. She lived in the neighborhood of Yootha's home in Cumberland with a crushed creature she called a husband, and had always strongly disapproved of what she called "the girl's abominable independence" in deserting the stagnation of her native village

to live her own life in London. "What is more," the woman used sometimes to add, "I should not be a bit surprised if one day we heard some deplorable story about her. It's just what the Bible says, 'Bring up a child and away it do go,' and the Bible speaks the truth every time, you know."

It was this futile person who had first hinted to Yootha's parents that it was not *comme il faut* for a daughter of theirs to live a bachelor life in London, and it was on the strength of her having said so that Yootha's father had spoken as he had done on the occasion of his visit to London with his wife some months before, when they had tried to induce Yootha to go back with them to Cumberland.

"I wish you would tell me, Yootha darling, what is the matter with you these days."

The speaker was her dear friend, Cora Hartsilver, and as she spoke she encircled the girl with her arm and pressed her cheek to hers.

"Don't you think you might tell just little me?" she went on coaxingly, as Yootha tried feebly to disengage herself. "Haven't we always exchanged secrets, and confided in each other implicitly? Don't say there is nothing the matter, because I can see that you have something on your mind. I have noticed the change in you for weeks, and others have noticed it too. Who is it, my darling? Or perhaps—you will let me give one little guess?"

"Cora, what nonsense you talk!" the girl answered quickly. "I am perfectly well, I have never

been better, and there is nothing at all on my mind."

"On your word of honor?"

"On my word of——"

She stopped abruptly.

"Ah, I knew that like Washington you couldn't tell a lie," Cora laughed. "Well, then, may I make my little guess?"

"Oh, guess anything you like, if it gratifies a whim!" Yootha exclaimed, coloring slightly. "I suppose you are going to say that you think I am in love! Why do married women always imagine that every girl they meet is bound to be in love? It's a perfectly rotten notion. Men as a rule bore me stiff, as I have often told you. The majority of the men I meet, except a few in Bohemian circles, seem not to have half-a-dozen original ideas of their own."

"Isn't that rather tautologic? Well, yes, many men are dull, that I admit, but all are not dull, even those who don't live, or, so far as I know, even mix in what you call Bohemian circles. Also there are men, you know, who to some appear dull, but to others . . .

"Do you remember a little lunch party at the Ritz some time before the Armistice, Yootha?" she went on. "We were invited by Archie La Planta, and among the people he introduced to us was a man who to most of us seemed unutterably dull—beautiful Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson, for instance, had difficulty in concealing the fact that this man bored

her intensely, and yet I am convinced that even that day Captain Charlie Preston attracted you in a way you had never before been attracted by anyone, and——”

She stopped for her friend's expression had suddenly completely changed. She was looking up at Cora now with shining eyes, while her lips, slightly parted, quivered a little as her breath came rather quickly. Then all at once, as though acting on impulse, she gripped Cora's wrists.

“Who told you?” she asked in a quick undertone. “I thought nobody even suspected.”

“Naturally you would. Women in love always think, and often do, the wrong thing. Good heavens, Yootha, I've known it for months! I suspected it the first time you and he met, that day at the Ritz, and the only thing I am surprised at is that you should have kept me in ignorance—or so you thought—all this time. Has he said anything yet?”

“Said anything? Of course not! What a question to ask!”

“Yes, I suppose it is silly to ask a girl if a man who is obviously in love with her has asked her to——”

“Say that again!” Yootha interrupted excitedly. “Do you really mean it? Do you really think that——”

“Well, go on—think that he really loves you? I don't merely think it. I know it.”

“How? Has he told you?”

“Oh, Yootha, we spoke a moment ago about peo-

ple being dull. You, I think, are the most obtuse person I have ever met."

Thus they continued to talk, and the girl, having at last fully admitted the truth, ended by baring her soul to the woman who had so long been her friend. Now, without fear or reticence, she told Cora Hartsilver that she had fallen madly in love that day at lunch at the Ritz with the wounded officer who had, during the whole meal, hardly spoken at all.

But it was at Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's "at home" afterwards, she went on to explain, when they had sat together listening to Tchaikowsky's "None but the Weary Heart," that the full flood of her affection had poured forth. It had poured forth in silence, for naturally she had not dared on such short acquaintanceship, to allow her feelings to betray themselves. And ever since that afternoon the pain of her love for the wounded man whom she had pitied perhaps almost as much as she loved him, had continued to increase.

While conversing the two women who were such friends had been together on a settee. Now, all at once, Cora Hartsilver became strangely silent. Yootha looked at her in surprise for some moments.

"Why, Cora, what has come over you?" she said suddenly, moving closer to her. "You are not put out at what I have told you, are you?"

"Put out? Indeed no," and as she spoke she unconsciously laid her hand upon the girl's and

held it rather tightly. "No, I was only thinking—it was only something that——"

She caught her breath, and Yootha heard her sob.

"Cora, Cora," she exclaimed. "Oh, do tell me what is the matter! What is it you are thinking of?"

Their arms were about each other now, their faces pressed together. Then, suddenly, Cora Hart-silver broke down, and began to cry piteously.

"It is something I meant never to tell anybody," she said when at last Yootha had succeeded in comforting her to some extent. "But what you have told me about your love for Captain Preston has brought it all back afresh. If I tell you, will you promise on your word never to tell a living soul?"

"Of course I will. I promise now, and on my word. What is it, Cora? I have confided in you completely, so surely you can confide in me? You know I can keep a secret, don't you, dear? Now tell me all about it."

For some moments Cora remained silent, at intervals mopping her eyes with her pocket-handkerchief. Then at last she said, speaking in a low tone:

"You remember Sir Stephen Lethbridge?"

"Remember him? Why, of course."

"Yootha, I was dreadfully in love with him! I was in love with him when I married, and after my marriage my love for him increased so that I hardly knew what to do."

"But why have you never told me this before, dear? I had not the slightest suspicion. Did Henry suspect anything?"

"No. But then Henry was extraordinarily obtuse. When I read in the newspaper the account of the tragedy, he was in the room, but I managed to conceal my feelings and to speak and act as though nothing unusual had occurred. How I did it I don't know. And next day when we all lunched at the Ritz, the day Captain Preston was introduced to you, I showed nothing, did I? Yet my heart was almost breaking."

She paused a moment, and then continued:

"And that day—Henry died! Oh, if only he had died a little sooner, before poor Stephen had made away with himself—just think, Yootha, I might have saved Stephen, he might be alive to-day, and——"

She broke down suddenly and began to sob again piteously. Minutes passed before her friend succeeded in calming her once more.

"But how could you have saved his life even if Henry had died sooner?" Yootha said presently in a puzzled tone.

"Why, a week before, Stephen had written begging me to come to him. He was in great trouble, he declared, something he could not explain in a letter, or, as he put it, 'dared not explain.' We had been friends from childhood, as you know, and he had, when a boy, told me many of his secrets. But of course I couldn't go. What excuse could I have made to Henry? You know the sort of man

Henry was, and how he thought it a wife's 'duty' to have no secrets from her husband. Somehow when I got that letter from Stephen the tone in which he wrote frightened me. The thought actually flashed through my mind that he might be contemplating something dreadful, though I did not suspect—that."

"Did he know you were in love with him?"

"Yes, he had known it a long time. Also he looked on me as his best friend. What has worried me so since his death is the thought of what can have made him shoot himself. I had heard rumors of his mixing with undesirable people; spending more money than he ought. Those rumors may not have been true. Even if they were, that could not be a reason for him to take his life. I feel convinced that what made him do it was something he was going to tell me."

"Your saying that, Cora, reminds me of Lord Froissart. I hear that he is moving heaven and earth to find out why Vera ended her life—everybody knows that she did end it. I hear he thinks there was some mystery; also I am told—though this may not be true—that he fancies Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson knows the reason. She and Vera were very intimate."

"Oh, Yootha," Mrs. Hartsilver exclaimed, now fast recovering from her outburst of grief. "I meant to have told you that Lord Froissart is coming here this evening. I kept it secret at first, because he is bringing, at my request, Captain

Preston with him. I meant to spring Captain Preston upon you as a surprise, because, as I have told you, I knew all along you were in love with him."

Yootha could hardly contain herself. In her ecstasy of delight she drew her friend to her and kissed her.

"How perfectly sweet of you, Cora," she cried. "And how exactly like you that is, always trying to give people pleasure. How soon will they be here?"

"Lord Froissart is dining at his club, and Captain Preston is dining with him. Lord Froissart said he would bring him along after dinner."

And so it came about that three days after the incidents which had occurred in the house with the bronze face, Lord Froissart, Captain Preston, Cora Hartsilver and Yootha Hagerston were gathered together in Cora's drawing-room in her house in Park Crescent.

Though at first the conversation of the four was commonplace and conventional, by degrees, as was inevitable, it drifted to a subject in which all were deeply interested. Lord Froissart had been relating as much as he deemed it advisable to tell them about his unpleasant experience in the house with the bronze face, when Cora suddenly asked:

"Might not the Metropolitan Secret Agency be able to discover some clue which would lead to the mysteries being cleared up which surround the many strange deaths that have occurred within

the past year or so? You and I both have cause, Lord Froissart, to wish that something could be done in that respect."

For a moment nobody spoke. Mrs. Hartsilver and Lord Froissart had known each other some years, and once before, about a month previously, they had spoken about this.

"Well, as you have broached the subject," he said at last, "I don't mind telling you now that my visit to the house in question was made for the purpose of consulting Stothert on that very point. The series of tragedies that has occurred is so remarkable that one cannot help thinking there must have been some reason for it. And if I may say so, Mrs. Hartsilver, your husband's death was, in my opinion, the most astonishing of all. I can say with truth that if anybody had asked me to pick out from among my many acquaintances the man I considered the least likely to make an attempt on his life, I should unhesitatingly have named poor Hartsilver. Self-destruction was a thing we once spoke about, and he appeared to have a horror of the bare thought of it."

"I wonder, Mrs. Hartsilver," Captain Preston said slowly, and as he spoke he fixed his great gray eyes upon her, "if you can tell me anything about this woman whose name seems to be on everybody's lips, and whose portrait we see in all the picture papers—this Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson?"

A tense silence followed.

"I am afraid I cannot," Cora said, after a pause.

"People say she is of Australian extraction, and that her father was a sheep farmer."

"I have heard that, too," Lord Froissart said quickly.

"Therefore three of us have heard it, and presumably from different sources. Yet this afternoon a friend of mine, George Blenkiron, who has lived twenty years in Australia and knows the up country and down, assured me that there is no sheep farmer of the name of either Robertson or Mervyn-Robertson out there, nor ever has been within his recollection."

"But Mervyn-Robertson is surely her husband's name?" Yootha said.

"Quite right. Oddly enough, however, her maiden name was Robertson. Blenkiron knew that much, though he doesn't live in London, or mix much in London society. He found it out quite by accident, and in rather a curious way."

CHAPTER VII.

CONCERNS "DEAR JESSICA."

JESSICA MERVYN-ROBERTSON was a remarkable woman. Tall, with a wonderful figure, she looked even taller than she actually was owing to her splendid bearing. Graceful in her every movement, wherever she went she focused attention. Her hair was of that peculiar shade of auburn blending into copper which seems, when the sun or the rays of artificial light strike it, to be shot with golden red. Her pale complexion contrasted oddly with the natural crimson of her lips, and when she looked at you there was an expression in her deep-set, almost green eyes which few men could resist. And yet perhaps what people noticed most about her was the curious intonation of her voice, a voice never forgotten by any man or woman who had once heard it. Had she been a singer she would have been a rich contralto.

She had appeared in London for the first time some years before this story opens, and within a few months had made hosts of friends. At that time she had a suite of apartments at Claridge's, where she entertained largely and on a lavish scale. Though nobody could say for certain whence she came, or from what source she derived her fortune, people of rank and others of social standing flocked

to her receptions in their hundreds. She was said to have a husband, though no one had ever seen him, and nobody seemed in the least to care who or what he might be. People were satisfied to take so alluring a woman as they found her, and so popular had she become before the end of her first year in London, and so fashionable were her social functions, that not to know Jessica Mervyn-Robertson was to admit that you were *hors concours*.

Aloysius Stapleton she had met for the first time, so people said, on Gold Cup day at Ascot about nine months after she had settled in London. Stapleton had for several years been a man about town; he was a well-to-do bachelor with a flat in Sandringham Mansions, Maida Vale, and a small place in the country, near Uckfield, whose calling in life seemed to be the quest of pleasure and nothing else. Certainly he had no profession, nor, apparently, had he need of one. Wherever people belonging to *le monde ou l'on s'amuse* were to be found gathered together, there you would meet "Louie" Stapleton, dressed always in the height of fashion and ever ready to entertain friends by inviting them to dine or lunch, taking them to the theater, or even asking them to spend week-ends with him at his place, "The Nest," in Sussex.

A day or two after Froissart and Preston, Cora Hartsilver, and Yootha Hagerston had spent the evening together at Cora's House in Park Crescent, Jessica Mervyn-Robertson, accompanied by Stapleton and Archie La Planta and several other friends,

sat in a box at the Alhambra watching the Russian Ballet, then the fashionable attraction.

It was the first night of Scheherezade, and the house was packed. Beautiful women gorgeously gowned, and men immaculately dressed crowded every box, and filled the stalls to overflowing. In every direction diamonds and other precious gems sparkled, and as the orchestra began the wonderful overture the audience, which had been talking volubly in anticipation of the silence which they knew must follow, became gradually hushed.

The ballet ended, and the usual buzz of conversation followed. So worked up had the audience become by the terrible scenes of lust, followed by carnage, that several women in the stalls were laughing hysterically. An elderly man in the box adjoining Jessica's, who obviously came from the provinces, and was witnessing Russian Ballet for the first time, could be heard expostulating in a north country accent against "such shows being permitted in a civilized land."

"And look at the clothes they wear—or rather don't wear!" he went on, warming to his subject. "I maintain such shows should be put down by law. If I had known it would be like this I should not have brought you, my dear," this to a faded woman, obviously his wife. "What has become of the censor that a ballet like this is allowed?"

People in the theater exclaimed "Hush!" while in the boxes adjacent there was much tittering. In spite of his protests, however, he remained, and the next ballet apparently met with his approval.

Somebody knocked at the door of the box occupied by Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson and her party, and La Planta got up to see who it was.

After an exchange of whispers with the attendant, he went out and shut the door.

When the second ballet ended, and he had not returned, Jessica showed signs of uneasiness.

"What can have become of Archie?" she said to Stapleton, who sat beside her. "Do you know who wanted him?"

"No. I am going out for a minute, so I will ask the attendant."

But when he succeeded in finding the attendant, she told him that the inquiry had been for Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson. The gentleman to whom she had given the message had said he would attend to it, and had gone into the foyer.

"Did he take his hat?" Stapleton asked.

"No, he came out just as he was."

"Then he cannot have left the theater. If you should see him will you tell him, please, that I have gone down to the foyer to find him?"

But La Planta was not in the foyer. Nor, apparently, was he anywhere else in the theater. Asked if a gentleman without a hat had gone out of the theater within the last half hour, the commissionaire replied that he had been absent a little while, so would not like to say.

La Planta had not returned to the box when Stapleton got back there, nor did he return at all. Jessica, told by Stapleton that the inquiry had been for her, looked at him oddly, but made no comment.

As usual, Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson—or as all her friends called her, Jessica—entertained her theater guests at supper at her house in Cavendish Square after the performance. Both she and Stapleton expected that La Planta would put in an appearance there, but he did not.

It was quite a big supper-party, for people kept arriving in cars until past one o'clock, so that when at last it came to an end, the guests grouped about the card tables in the room adjoining, playing "chemmy" and other games, numbered over thirty.

"What can have become of him?" Jessica said to Stapleton in an undertone as she drew him aside. "And without his hat, too. I can't imagine where he can have gone, or who it can have been who inquired for me. Archie ought to have told me!"

"I have telephoned twice to the Albany, but can get no reply."

"You wouldn't, at this time of the night."

"Why not? He has an extension to his man's bedroom."

"Then do ring again, Louie. I am anxious about him."

This time Stapleton was more successful, for after two futile attempts the operator got through, and a sleepy, rather irritated voice asked huskily:

"Hello! hello! Who is that ringing?"

"It's Mr. Stapleton, James. I am sorry to wake you up, but can you tell me if Mr. La Planta has come in?"

"If you will please to hold on, sir," the voice

replied in a different tone, "I will ascertain and let you know."

For some minutes Stapleton waited with the receiver glued to his ear. He was beginning to think the man had gone to sleep again, when suddenly he heard him returning. He sounded as if he were running.

"Are you there, sir?"

"Yes."

"Mr. La Planta is lying on his sofa, sir, fast asleep. I've called him and shaken him, but he won't wake up. The light in his room was full on. He must have been drugged or something. He is breathing very heavy, very heavy indeed, sir. I'm going to ring up the doctor."

"No, don't do that. I'll come round at once and see him; the doctor may not be wanted. Be ready to let me in as soon as I arrive."

The card-players still grouped about the little tables were busy with their games. In a small room beyond the drawing-room could be heard the rattle of the little marble as it spun merrily round in the well of the roulette, and a voice murmuring at intervals: "*Faites vos jeux*," and "*Rien n' va plus*."

Jessica came forward as she saw him approaching.

"Come into the hall," he said in a low tone, "and I will tell you."

In a few words he explained to her what had happened.

"Don't be alarmed," he ended. "I will go there now, and will ring you up and report progress."

Taxis were waiting in Cavendish Square, and within five minutes he alighted at the Albany.

La Planta's face was very pale. He lay with lips slightly parted, breathing heavily. His eyelids were but half closed, and though Stapleton drew one of them up, the sleeper did not awake.

"Obviously doped," he said to James, who stood by with a frightened look.

He bent over his friend until their faces were very close.

"And I think I know with what," he added, thinking aloud. "You have no idea, James, how long he had been in?"

"None at all, sir. I didn't know he was in until you rang me up."

"There is no need to send for a doctor," Stapleton said, as he straightened himself. "It is nothing dangerous. His pulse is strong, and he will sleep off the effects of the drug. By the way, did anybody call to see him, or ring him up, while he was out this evening?"

"Nobody called, sir, but a lady rang him up."

"A lady? At about what time?"

The man thought for a moment.

"As near as maybe, I should say it was nine o'clock, sir."

"Anybody you know? Did she give any name?"

"No, sir. It was not a voice I recognized."

"Leave any message?"

"No, sir. Just asked where Mr. La Planta was, and I told her at the Alhambra. Then she asked

who was with him, and I said you and Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson I knew for certain, and I said I fancied there were others. Then she said 'Thank you' and rang off, sir."

Suddenly a thought struck Stapleton, and he slipped his hand into his friend's pockets. But apparently nothing was missing. From the breast pocket he withdrew a wallet containing notes, and from the trousers pocket a handful of silver.

Then he went to the telephone and rang up Jessica. But the voice which answered was not hers.

"Ask Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson to come to the telephone, please," he said.

"Is that Mr. Stapleton?"

"Yes."

"John speaking, sir, the footman. I am afraid she can't, sir. She has been taken suddenly ill."

"Ill! How? In what way?"

"She fainted dead off, sir, not five minutes after you had gone."

Stapleton paused for an instant. All at once an idea flashed in upon him.

"John!"

"Sir?"

"Is anybody near the telephone? Can anybody hear you speaking?"

"One moment, sir."

Stapleton heard a door being quietly closed.

"Nobody can hear me now, sir."

"Then tell me—don't speak loud—did Mrs. Rob-

ertson take anything, I mean drink or eat anything, after I had gone out just now?"

There was a brief pause, then:

"Yes, sir, she drank a glass of champagne at the sideboard."

"Was anybody with her? Or near her? Did anybody ask her if she would have a glass of wine?"

"Well, yes, sir. A gentleman asked her. I happened to be near. And I did notice that a lady was by when she drank it. They each had a glass of wine."

"Do you know the lady and gentleman?"

"I know them well by sight, sir, but not their names. They have been to supper before; once or twice, I think, but they don't often come."

"Do they come together?"

"I think so, sir."

"And you could describe their appearance to me?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Thank you, John. Of course you will say nothing of all this to anybody. You won't forget that?"

"You can rely upon my absolute discretion, sir."

"Good. I shall be back at Cavendish Square within an hour, and I will see you then."

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH A DISCOVERY IS MADE.

It was past four in the morning when Aloysius Stapleton got back to his flat in Sandringham Mansions, Maida Vale. After remaining with La Planta nearly an hour, he had gone back to Cavendish Square, where he found Jessica still unconscious, her symptoms being somewhat similar to Archie's, though her brain, while she slept, seemed to be active. Several times she had, he was told, murmured incoherently, and twice she had spoken several words. Even when he arrived there her lips kept quivering at intervals, as if she were dreaming.

"How long ago did the guests leave?" he inquired of her maid.

"The last few of them have not been long gone," she answered, "not above twenty minutes."

"Do you know which were the last to go?"

"I don't, sir. I only heard them leaving. Ought she not to be put to bed now, as you don't wish the doctor to be sent for?"

"Yes, take her upstairs. She will be all right in the morning."

"I sincerely hope so. She is never taken this way—never."

The maid spoke almost reproachfully, as though

Stapleton were in some way responsible for her mistress having fainted.

"Send John to me," he said to her sharply.

When Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson had been carried up to her bedroom, Stapleton took the footman into the dining-room and shut the door.

"Now, tell me," he said, "who were the last to leave to-night?"

The young footman described them. Yes, he admitted that among them were the two guests, the man and the woman, who had been with Jessica while she drank champagne at the sideboard, but he did not know their names.

Stapleton's brain worked rapidly while he mechanically undressed in his flat in Sandringham Mansions. There could be no doubt, in his opinion, that the hand that had drugged La Planta had also drugged Jessica. In addition, he felt convinced that whoever had done it had been among the guests at Cavendish Square that evening. But who could it have been, and with what object had he, or she, committed the despicable act?

After ascertaining by telephone next morning that both Archie and Jessica had recovered and were once more in their right senses, he drove in his car first to the Albany.

Archie, wrapped in an elaborate dressing-gown of Japanese corded silk, was having breakfast in his bedroom. He looked unusually pale, Stapleton thought directly he entered, and there were dark marks under his eyes.

"I wish you would tell me, Louie," Archie said,

"what happened to me last night, and how I managed to come away from the Alhambra without my hat. I might have imagined I had drunk too much—had there been anything to drink."

"I can tell you nothing, because I know nothing," Stapleton answered, and went on to explain how they had suddenly missed him from the box, and what had happened afterwards.

"Who was it brought the message for Jessica, and why did you leave the box without delivering it to her?" he ended.

His friend drew his hand across his forehead then pressed his fingers on his eyes, as though trying to remember.

"I am sorry, Louie," he said at last, "but I have not the faintest recollection of receiving any message, or of leaving the box. I can remember the ballet, or rather the first part of it. After that my mind is a blank. The next thing I remember is waking up this morning and feeling very rotten. I feel at sixes and sevens still."

Not until lunch time was Stapleton able to see Jessica, and then she complained of a headache and of feeling utterly limp. When he questioned her she replied that she had no recollection of drinking champagne at the sideboard, or even of talking to him after supper. She remembered her anxiety about Archie, she said, and coming home in the car, and Stapleton sitting beside her at supper, and *chemin de fer* and roulette being played. But there her memory stopped.

"That is as I expected," Stapleton said when she

had ceased speaking. "Your symptoms are similar to Archie's. I should say, therefore, that you were both doped with the same drug, one effect of which apparently is to deaden memory not from the time it is taken, but from a little while before it is taken. I think it is clear that the individual who came to the Alhambra with a message for you intended, by some means, to give you the drug then. But Archie took the message, went out, and presumably met the person who brought it. Then, having failed to see you, this person succeeded in drugging Archie, came on here—he, or it may have been a woman, was evidently among your guests—and actually drugged you in your own house. Now the question is—why was it done? and by whom?"

"I can't imagine."

"Have you missed anything? Is your jewelry intact, and are your other valuables safe?"

"I hope so. I haven't looked."

"Then you had better look at once."

And then it was the discovery was made that the safe in her boudoir had been opened and ransacked. It had contained, in addition to a rope of priceless pearls and a quantity of uncut diamonds, four thousand five hundred and sixty-eight pounds in Bank of England notes, Treasury notes, and cash, moneys kept there for banking the roulette and the other games of chance frequently played at her house. The lot had vanished, and the safe had been relocked and the key replaced in the little bag which Jessica always carried concealed about her person.

Unless a duplicate key had been employed, which seemed hardly probable.

Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson was in despair; yet she did not make a scene or become hysterical as so many women would have done in the circumstances. On the contrary, she kept her wits about her, and remained singularly calm.

Just then John, the footman, entered the room with some letters.

"Well, what am I to do about it?" she said to Stapleton, controlling her voice.

"We can't do better than consult the Metropolitan Secret Agency," he answered. "If they can't help us I don't believe anybody can. Have you the numbers of the notes?"

"No."

"The Agency may be able to trace the pearls, anyhow. There are only a few places in England and on the Continent where stolen pearls of that sort can be disposed of, and Stothert was telling me only the other day that he knows the whereabouts of every receiver of stolen goods in this country, and on the Continent, too."

The footman, having delivered the letters, retired, closing the door behind him.

Stapleton and Jessica looked at each other oddly.

"Let us go and find Archie," she said, preparing to rise. "You say he told you he might remain at home?"

But at that moment the door opened, and the footman, entering again, announced:

"Captain Preston and Mr. Blenkiron."

Jessica bit her lip. Then, as the visitors came in, she received them with her dazzling smile.

"How glad I am to see you after all this time," she exclaimed. "Mr. Stapleton was speaking of you not five minutes ago, and I asked him what had become of you both—I thought you must have left town."

"I am rarely in town," Blenkiron said. "I live in the country, you know."

"So you do. I had forgotten. But you, Captain Preston, I never see you anywhere. Don't you live in town?"

"Yes, but I rarely go about; my leg is such a handicap, you see. We happened to be passing, so I suggested our calling on the chance of finding you at home. I have not been here since you gave that delightful musical *At Home*—eight or nine months ago it must have been—but I shall never forget the way your friend sang Tchaikowsky's 'None but the Weary Heart.' It was too gorgeous."

"Are you so fond of music? You are not like most soldiers."

"The one thing I love."

"The *one* thing?" she laughed mischievously. "That I can hardly believe!"

For an instant their eyes met. Hers were laughing, mischievous still. His had grown suddenly hard.

"Some one told me the other day," Blenkiron happened to remark, "that you lived at one time

in Queensland, Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson. I have been a great deal in Australia. Was it long ago?"

"Longer than I like to think about," she answered. "I was a girl when my parents sent me home."

"You mean to England?"

"Yes."

"What town were you in, or near, when you lived in Queensland?"

"Monkarra—if one can call it a town," she answered.

"Indeed! I know Monkarra. I have been there several times. I wonder I never met you or your people."

"Australia is a big place, Mr. Blenkiron."

"But its population is small, and Monkarra, as you say, is only a hamlet. Some one told me your father's name was Robertson."

"People seem to have been talking a lot to you about me," she said quickly.

"And can you be surprised?"

The words conveyed two meanings, and Jessica turned the conversation.

"As you are fond of music," she said to Preston, "you must honor me again with your company the next time I have any. Men, for the most part, are such Philistines. The only 'music' they seem to care for is comic opera and ragtime."

She talked more or less mechanically, for all the while her thoughts were running on the loss she had just sustained. One by one her guests of the previous night passed in review through her mind.

Each was in turn carefully considered, then dismissed as being above suspicion in connection with the theft.

Then, suddenly, for no apparent reason, she thought of Cora Hartsilver, and of her husband who had killed himself. Quickly Yootha Hagerston followed—she rose into the vision of her imagination with extraordinary distinctness. Both women she disliked, she reflected; and she was sure that they disliked her. And now she remembered being told—yes, Archie La Planta had told her—that Captain Preston admired the girl. Archie had said that Preston “admired her extremely.”

And that girl, and Preston himself, also Cora Hartsilver, had been trying—this Archie had also told her—to extract information from him concerning herself and her past. Could it be mere coincidence that Preston and his friend Blenkiron had called unexpectedly like this—the first time they had ever called—and that Blenkiron should have asked her questions about Australia? Who could have told him, she wondered, that her father’s name was Robertson?

“Talking of Australia,” Blenkiron’s voice held her, “your father has been dead a good many years, I suppose?”

“Ten years,” she heard herself saying; and unconsciously she wondered why she said it.

“And your mother?”

“I was quite a child when she died.”

“And they lived at Monkarra?”

"My father did. My mother died in Charleville."

"Strange," Blenkiron was speaking to himself, "I should not have met your father, or your mother, during the years I was in Queensland."

"But why should you have met them? What were you doing in Australia?"

"I did all sorts of things there. I prospected for gold for some years; and for years I was working on a railway—engineering work, you understand; and then for a time I was sheep farming out there. It is, in my opinion, the one country on earth."

"And yet you have settled in England."

"Because my interests are all in England now. The war made such a change."

Suddenly Preston rose.

"I must be going, Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson," he said. "I hope you will invite me the next time you have music."

"Indeed I shall not forget—that is, if I have your address. Shall I write it down?"

She went over to the *escritoire*, and he followed her.

"Thirty-three, Q., Fig Tree Court, Temple," he said, and she made a note of it.

He limped slowly down the stairs, supporting himself on his stick, and Blenkiron followed.

As they made their way into Oxford Street, Blenkiron spoke.

"A clever woman—a damned clever woman," he said. "And what a presence! What a personality! Did you notice that to every question I put to her

she had an answer—pat! Yet I don't believe a word she said, or that she or her parents were ever in Australia. There is some mystery about that woman, and about that fellow Stapleton who is always in her pocket."

They had turned into Oxford Street, when Blenkinsop suddenly caught his companion by the sleeve.

"Look," he said, "there goes young La Plante, on his way to see our friends. That lad, too, I have grave doubts about!"

CHAPTER IX.

BEFRIENDING A REPORTER.

THOUGH several weeks had passed, no trace had been discovered of Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's missing property. For reasons of her own she had prevented any mention of the robbery being made in the newspapers, and apparently even the Metropolitan Secret Agency had this time failed to make good.

Preparations were in progress for the great ball to be given at the Albert Hall by Aloysius Stapleton and his friend, young La Planta, and as Jessica still said she preferred not to act as hostess on that occasion, Stapleton had succeeded in enlisting the services of a well-known peeress who, helped by friends of her own, would receive his guests on the eventful night.

It was expected that "all London" would be there, and as the ball had been organized by Stapleton and La Planta ostensibly in aid of some charitable object, the newspaper press had laid itself out to give plenty of publicity.

"If I had arranged to make it a private ball," Stapleton observed to Jessica one evening, "it would have cost me an enormous sum, and hundreds who have now bought tickets would not have done so. I was right to take your advice—you remember telling me the way to make a ball of this sort an

unqualified success, and at the same time run it at other people's expense, was to make it a 'charity' concern; get the newspapers to print columns of fancy stories about it and publish lists of names of people with titles likely to be present; and let it be known that women of high social standing would receive the guests. That advice was excellent, Jessica. There has been such a rush for tickets that if it continues we shall have to stop selling."

"Have I ever given you bad advice?" Jessica asked with a smile. "In matters of this sort, and for that matter in most cases, a clever woman's advice is the safest advice to follow. You have not yet asked me what I am going to wear. It is too late now to tell you. But this I can say—my dress will surprise you."

"I don't want to be surprised."

"Naturally. Nobody does. But I have a reason for wanting to surprise you at your own 'charity' ball," and she laughed. "You will find out why, later. Have you any idea what Cora Hartsilver and her precious friend, Yootha Hagerston, intend to wear?"

"Not the slightest. How should I? And why should their dresses interest you?"

"They do interest me, and that is sufficient. If you have not enough acumen to guess the reason, I don't think much of your intellectual foresight," and she laughed again in her deep contralto voice.

Meanwhile Jessica Mervyn-Robertson and Cora Hartsilver met often at receptions, dances and

other social functions, and, though outwardly friendly, each knew the other secretly hated her.

At a lunch party in Mayfair during the first days of June there had been talk about Ascot, and Jessica had mentioned casually that on Gold Cup Day fortune invariably favored her. Twice, she said, she had found herself at the end of the day much richer than in the morning, "and in other ways," she added, "Gold Cup Day has helped me towards happiness."

"Would it be too much to inquire what the other ways were?" Cora, who sat near her at the angle of the table, said lightly. "I can't see how good fortune could come to anybody on a race day except through the actual racing unless——"

"Unless what?" Jessica asked quickly, with an odd look, as Cora checked herself.

"Well, one might happen to meet somebody whom afterwards one might come to like very much," Cora replied with a far-away look.

One or two people, happening to remember they had heard somewhere that Jessica had first become acquainted with Aloysius Stapleton at an Ascot meeting, smiled.

"I agree," Jessica said with exaggerated indifference. "But the same thing might happen to anybody anywhere—say at lunch at the Ritz, or at one of my own musical At Homes, or at——"

She was interrupted by one of the men at the end of the table who, not seeing she was engaged in conversation, inquired if she would make one of

the party he meant to drive down to Ascot on his coach.

"It is rather short notice, Mrs. Robertson," he added, "but until this morning I had not actually decided to go down. Do say 'Yes' if you have not made other arrangements."

"I shall be delighted to come," she answered after a moment's hesitation. "I suppose you mean Gold Cup Day?"

"Yes, Gold Cup Day. That is good of you. Then it is settled?"

"Lucky again!" Cora Hartsilver said with a curious laugh. "I shall end by becoming superstitious myself. Will you give me all the winners on Gold Cup Day, Jessica?"

"Oh, then you will be there?"

"If I am lucky, too."

"And I suppose Yootha with you? Oh! but I needn't ask," she ended with a malicious little laugh.

The luncheon came to an end just then, which was as well, for the two women were each awaiting an opportunity to deal the other metaphorically a blow between the eyes. For weeks past their hatred had been smoldering. To-day it had come near to bursting into flame.

When Cora met Yootha that afternoon, she at once told her of her passage-of-arms at lunch with Jessica Robertson, and of Jessica's hardly veiled sneer at their friendship.

"Why let that annoy you, Cora dear?" Yootha exclaimed. "Heaven knows why the woman dis-

likes you so, or why she dislikes me, as I know she does. I expect the truth is she has heard that we are trying to find out who she is. And I mean to go on trying, until I do find out."

"And I am with you. I am as certain as that I am standing here that she is an impostor of some sort, though up to the present she and her friends, Stapleton and La Planta, have been clever enough to hide the truth. Has it never struck you as strange, Yootha, that not a word got into the papers about the theft of her jewelry and things, though all one's friends knew about it? What has made me think of that now is that I was told this morning by a friend of mine who writes or edits, or does something for some paper—no, you don't know him—that Stapleton and Jessica Robertson both moved heaven and earth to prevent the affair being reported in the press."

"But why?"

"Exactly—but why? I was wondering if she could have some reason for not wanting her name to get into the papers, but as one sees it in all the 'social columns' every day——"

"That may have been the reason, nevertheless. The jewelry, et cetera, were, if you remember, apparently stolen by one of her guests that night, and possibly she suspects one of them and is afraid of the scandal which would follow if he, or she, were convicted of the theft. Indeed, I can't think what other motive she can have had for not wanting anything to be said in the papers about the crime."

"I wonder," Cora said thoughtfully.

They would probably have been surprised if they had known that Captain Preston, too, who of course had also heard of the robbery, had been puzzling his brain to account for Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's aversion from press publicity in connection with the robbery.

"I tell you it's devilish odd, George," he had said to his friend Blenkiron only the night before, as the two sat smoking together in his rooms in Fig Tree Court, "that woman and her dear friend Stapleton being so desperately anxious to keep the affair out of the papers. If you or I were burgled should we care a button if the facts were made public or not? Would anybody else whose house was burgled object to the fact being known? Then why this hush-hush movement on the part of Jessica Robertson and her friends—young La Planta, too, helped to keep it quiet."

"Who told you?"

"Harry Hopford. He was with me in Flanders a long time, and I came across him in Whitefriars only the other day—he is back on his newspaper again. He said the steps that woman and her two friends took to prevent mention being made in the papers of the robbery at her house during one of her night parties, aroused a good deal of conjecture in Fleet Street. Some of the reporters were actually paid to say nothing about it. He told me so himself."

For some moments both were silent.

"She must have had some strong motive for wanting to hush it up," Blenkiron said at last.

"That is what I say. Now, what can the reason have been? I tell you again, George, there is more behind those people than anybody suspects. And who are they? And where do they come from? You can try as you like, but you won't find out."

"I certainly don't believe Mrs. Robertson's story that her father was a sheep farmer in Queensland. I know every town and village in Queensland, have known them over twenty years, and it is impossible that if her father had been sheep farming out there, even in a small way, I should not have known him, at any rate by name."

"It seems that the police were not notified of the theft. Only the Metropolitan Secret Agency was told about it, and for a wonder it failed to discover a clue. You know how clever that Agency is in running thieves to earth. I am told it hardly ever fails, though there are queer rumors as to the methods it employs to catch criminals."

It was Harry Hopford, though Preston did not know it, who had told Cora Hartsilver about the hushing up in the press. They were not intimately acquainted; Hopford had met Cora at a dance one night which he was attending professionally, and afterwards they had recognized each other at the Chelsea Flower Show and engaged in conversation. Thus neither Hopford nor Cora suspected that the other was acquainted with Captain Preston.

It so happened that, some days after this conver-

sation, Hopford had occasion to call to see Stapleton to obtain from him some facts about the approaching ball at the Albert Hall. Being, as all journalists have to be, of an inquisitive disposition, he referred incidentally to the theft of jewelry and notes from Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's house in Cavendish Square, and casually inquired if the stolen property had been recovered.

"I am sure I don't know," Stapleton answered quickly. "What makes you think I should know?"

"I thought you might," Hopford replied calmly, "as you are acquainted with the lady and were at supper at her house on the night of the robbery."

"Who told you I was there?"

"Oh, the press generally knows these things."

"The press,' as you call it, is a damned nuisance at times," Stapleton said sharply. "I suppose a report of that robbery would have appeared in every paper if Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson had not asked the editors to refrain from giving her undesirable notoriety. I can't think why newspapers always want to publish detailed reports of crimes. Such reports do a lot of harm, I am sure—a lot of harm."

"The papers wouldn't publish the reports if the public was not anxious to read them," Hopford replied with assurance. "You should blame the public, Mr. Stapleton, not the press."

"Nothing ever did appear about that robbery, did it?" Stapleton asked, looking at the young reporter rather oddly.

"Not so far as I am aware."

Stapleton remained silent for a minute. He seemed to be thinking.

"Are you ever in need of money, my lad?" he inquired suddenly.

Hopford laughed.

"Show me the journalist who isn't," he said. "Why?"

"Supposing I made it worth your while——"

"Yes?"

"Well, it's like this—by the way, what's your name?"

"Hopford—Harry Hopford."

"Come and sit down, Hopford—here, have a cigar. Now then, I am in a position to be able to do you a good turn now and again, in other words, to benefit you pecuniarily, if in return you will do as I suggest and at the same time keep absolutely silent about it. Don't think I am going to ask you to do anything terrible. I am not," and he smiled.

"I dare say it could be managed," Hopford answered dreamily, as he began to enjoy the cigar. "Hadn't you better tell me exactly what it is you want me to do, then I shall be able to give you a straightforward answer at once. Anything you may tell me I shall, of course, consider confidential."

"That's the spirit; that's the way I like to hear a young fellow talk. Well now, listen."

Stapleton glanced towards the door to see that it was shut, then continued:

"There are several things you may be able to do for me from time to time, and the first is this. I

am practically certain I know who took the diamonds and the notes, and the rest of the stuff stolen that night, and though naturally I don't intend to mention the lady's name, I can hint at it. I believe the thief—yes, thief—to be a young widow whose husband died in tragic circumstances nine or ten months ago—he was found dead in his bath one morning; possibly you recollect the affair."

"I ought to, seeing that I was sent to the house the same day to obtain particulars of the tragedy. The house is not far from Portland Place—am I right?"

"Quite."

"So the widow was among Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's guests at supper that night?"

"She was not. She was not even invited. Yet I have a good reason for supposing she was admitted, though the hostess never saw her."

"Would that have been possible?"

"Certainly. There was a great crush. At one time during the night one could hardly force one's way through it, and it was then the widow was admitted, the footman believing her to be an invited guest."

"Could you get me an interview with the footman?"

"Quite impossible, my dear fellow. Besides, it may not have been the footman who admitted her. That was merely my conjecture. It may have been one of the other servants."

"The butler, for instance."

"No, not the butler."

"And you are sure that she was there? You saw her?"

"No, no; don't jump at conclusions. I didn't see her—myself."

"Then who did?"

"That I must not tell you. It would be unwise."

"I have promised to respect your confidence."

"Quite so, or I should not have told you what I have. But names, you know, are sacred things. If I mentioned names it would be impossible for me afterwards to swear I had not done so, should an occasion for taking the oath, by some unforeseen chance, arise."

"I see your point. Well, can you, without committing yourself, hint to me the reason you believe the lady, whose identity you have practically revealed to me, ransacked Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's safe? Was it, should you say, for the intrinsic value of the things stolen, or was there some deeper reason?"

"Such as?"

"Documents, compromising letters, anything of that sort?"

"I am afraid I must not answer that either. You see, one has to be so careful. My idea in telling you as much as I have is that you should, without, of course, making any definite statement, hint in your paper that the crime was committed by a young widow well known in Society; you might go so far as to say the widow lost her husband in tragic cir-

cumstances comparatively recently, and you might also work in some fancy padding of your own. You could add that you had obtained your information from a trustworthy source."

"Meaning you."

"Of course. Who else?"

"And what terms do you propose?"

"That I must leave to you to suggest."

"I would sooner the offer came from you, Mr. Stapleton."

Stapleton hesitated a moment, then:

"Would a ten-pound note about meet the case? You see, you score by getting what I believe you call a 'scoop' for your paper."

"And run the risk of being fired if the lady hinted at should think fit to bring an action against my paper. Oh, no, Mr. Stapleton, I am not out to take sporting chances for the sake of pocketing a tenner. If you had said eighty or a hundred pounds I might—I say might—have felt tempted to take a chance, but a tenner——"

He rose, preparatory to leaving.

"Wait a minute, Hopford, wait a minute," Stapleton exclaimed, trying to conceal his eagerness as he laid a hand on the lad's shoulder to detain him. "I asked you to name a sum, remember—I have no idea what terms are usual in such cases. Sit down again and I may, after all, be able to meet your wishes."

With assumed reluctance the reporter sank back into the chair from which he had just risen, and

for another ten minutes he and Stapleton continued to converse. And when, finally, the former left the house, he carried in his breast-pocket five new ten-pound notes, and chuckled as he thought of Stapleton's promise to hand him five more notes on the publication of the scoop."

CHAPTER X.

A PARAGRAPH FOR THE PAPERS.

"FIFTY pounds easily earned," Hopford murmured as he strolled along Maida Vale, looking about him for a taxi. "I thought all along that fellow was hot stuff, in spite of the way the papers cocker him up. And so he wants people to think Mrs. Hartsilver committed, or at any rate had a hand in, that theft? What a blackguard! Now, I wonder why he owes her a grudge? Yes, he must owe her a grudge, and a pretty bad one, or he would never go so far as that."

Quickly his train of thought ran on. There was not an empty taxi in sight, so he decided to walk part of the way. One thought led to another. Solutions to the problem which puzzled him suggested themselves, only to be dismissed one after another as improbable. Then suddenly an idea occurred to him. Could there be another woman in the case? Some woman who was jealous of Mrs. Hartsilver?

Instantly the name Jessica Robertson rose to his lips. Why, of course, that must be it! At a loss to suspect any of her guests of having robbed her safe, she would take the opportunity, if opportunity occurred, of casting suspicion on the widow who lived in Park Crescent, and whose beauty and personality rivaled her own. Stapleton's partiality for

Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson was common talk. She, no doubt, had hinted her desire to him, and he had happened to remember it while being interviewed on the subject of the approaching ball.

So far, so good. A mystery to a newspaper reporter is like red meat to a tiger. Hopford felt that he had struck a mystery now which might develop later into a scandal. Then he remembered that at the Chelsea Flower Show he had met Mrs. Hart-silver. He must become friendly with her, and then he would play his cards.

He entered his office with a light heart. Those five ten-pound notes would be most useful, but what gratified him most was the thought of the news "story" he felt he was on the track of. Not the "story" Stapleton had hinted at. From the first he had not had the slightest intention of using that. Even if it possessed a grain of truth, which he doubted, that was not the sort of stuff he wanted for his paper, while to set out deliberately to wreck a woman's good name on no evidence in return for payment, was not to be countenanced for a moment.

No, he would never see that second fifty pounds. And, so thinking, he sighed.

"Hullo, what's up?" asked a colleague who sat near him. "Got the hump or something?"

"Oh, shut it!" Hopford snapped. "I'm dog tired."

"For that matter so am I, but I don't groan over it," his neighbor rapped back. "And yet I well might, after reporting two inquests and a cremation in one afternoon."

Hopford laughed.

"Never mind," he said. "Yesterday you attended two parades of *mannequins*, one in swimming suits. You told me so yourself, so you haven't much to grumble at."

For some minutes both went on writing, turning out their "copy" at a great pace.

"Odd thing this suicide—what?" Hopford's friend remarked as he laid down his fountain pen at last and pinned his sheets of copy together.

"What suicide?" Hopford inquired, while his pen ran swiftly on.

"You haven't heard? Everybody is talking about it in the clubs, though none of the evening papers has the story. I got details at the Junior Carlton, where I dined to-night. Lord Froissart belongs there."

"Froissart! You don't mean that Lord Froissart has committed suicide!" Hopford exclaimed, stopping in his work and looking up.

"Why, yes. His body was found at the foot of the cliffs at Bournemouth about six o'clock this evening. Nobody saw him go over, apparently, but while I was at the Junior Carlton the man I was dining with, a friend of Froissart's, got a telegram from a friend in Bournemouth saying that an open letter had just been found in the dead man's pocket, in which he confessed that he was about to take his life. My friend says Froissart never really got over the shock of his daughter's suicide—it was suicide in her case, too, of course. He also said that

of late Froissart had been looking terribly ill and worried. It's a good story, anyhow, and I think I have more facts than any other morning paper will get hold of. Lucky I happened to be dining with a man who knew Froissart intimately—what?"

Next day the papers were full of the tragedy. Lord Froissart had, it seemed, left his house in Queen Anne's Gate about eleven o'clock in the morning, the time he usually went out. He had called to see his lawyers, in Lincoln's Inn Fields, shortly before noon, and remained there about three quarters of an hour. From there he had gone, apparently on foot, to the Metropolitan Secret Agency, "the house with the bronze face," and after interviewing Mr. Alix Stothert, head of that concern, had lunched alone at Frascati's. He had caught the three thirty-seven train to Bournemouth, and after that nothing more was known until his body had been found at the foot of the cliffs by some children, who had at once run home and told their parents, who, in turn, had notified the police. All this the newspapers had succeeded in ferreting out before their late editions went to press.

The report written by Hopford contained certain intimate and exclusive details, however. Lord Froissart had stayed late at the Junior Carlton the night before, writing one letter after another. A waiter of whom he had inquired at what times fast trains left for Bournemouth said he had thought his lordship seemed "excitable and nervy." Before leaving the club, he added, deceased had pressed a five-

pound note into his hand, greatly to his surprise, for he had never before known Lord Froissart to infringe the club rules.

In addition this report stated that the writer knew for a fact that Lord Froissart had on several occasions recently spoken about suicide, a subject in which he appeared suddenly to evince a deep interest. Further, he had asked a friend of the writer's, two days previously, if he had any idea what height the highest cliffs at Bournemouth were, and if he had ever heard of any one committing suicide by jumping off them. A sealed letter found on the body was addressed in deceased's handwriting to his elder and only surviving child, the Honorable Mrs. Ferdinand-Westrup, then living in Ceylon with her husband, who was a tea planter. No motive could be assigned for Lord Froissart's having taken his life, though the shock of his daughter's death the year before might have unhinged his mind.

Some days later the usual verdict was returned—"Suicide whilst temporarily insane," and within a fortnight the tragedy had been virtually forgotten.

By all except one or two people. Captain Charles Preston remembered it; so did Cora Hartsilver, and so did Yootha Hagerston. And the reason they remembered it was this.

Lord Froissart died quite a rich man. His sole heir ought by rights to have been his daughter, Mrs. Ferdinand-Westrup. Instead, the bulk of his fortune and property were left to an individual of whom nobody, apparently, had ever heard—a Mrs.

Timothy Macmahon, described as the widow of Timothy Macmahon of Cashel, Co. Tipperary, and the will, which was not yet proved, had been executed on the morning of the very day of the tragedy, at the offices of Messrs. Eton, West and Shrubsole, solicitors, of Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Now those solicitors, as Preston happened to have heard from his servant, whose brother was a clerk in Eton, West and Shrubsole's office, were solicitors also to Jessica Mervyn-Robertson. A coincidence, perhaps, as Preston said to Cora Hartsilver a day or two after Froissart's death, yet in his opinion a curious coincidence.

And when, ten days later, Hopford succeeded in obtaining an interview with Cora Hartsilver, and told her of his interview with Aloysius Stapleton, and what Stapleton had tried to induce him to hint at in the newspaper—feeling it his duty to tell her, he had no hesitation in breaking faith with Stapleton—events in the life of Aloysius Stapleton began to look peculiar.

But still Stapleton and his intimate friends, Archie La Planta and Jessica Mervyn-Robertson, were to be met everywhere. Still their movements were chronicled almost daily in the social columns of the London press, while their portraits appeared frequently in the weekly periodicals.

But perhaps nowhere was Jessica so much noticed as at Ascot. The daily and the weekly papers had apparently laid themselves out to give her as much publicity there as possible. She was seen in her

car arriving on the course, accompanied by half a dozen friends, among them of course Stapleton and La Planta. She was seen walking on the course; she was seen in the paddock congratulating the owner of the winner of the Gold Cup; she was seen smiling at a duchess and shaking hands with a peer; she was seen conversing with a foreign premier.

Then the fashion papers "featured" her costumes—the gown she wore on the first day of the meeting, on the second day, and so on; the gowns she wore on different nights at the opera; the gowns she wore at Hurlingham, at Ranelagh, at the Military Tournament at Olympia, at the Richmond Show, on her houseboat above Henley until at last even her friends began seriously to ask one another who this woman was who, coming from nowhere, and unknown, had thus conquered London Society by her charm, her personality, and her beauty, but most of all, perhaps, by her lavish display and her extravagance.

And naturally people who were not her friends, women more especially, whispered. Others, when her name was mentioned, would smile significantly; smiles which did more harm than the whispers. For though nothing could be openly said against her, yet her would-be detractors were glad to insinuate evil.

That friend of hers, for instance, Aloysius Stapleton, why was he always at her heels? There might, of course, be no harm in the relationship; but on the other hand there might be harm, and as there

might be there probably was. That was the attitude many adopted towards her who nevertheless accepted her hospitality and were glad to be invited to her receptions—receptions which certainly were the talk of all the town. Yet, curiously enough, she had refused to act as hostess at the great ball to take place at the Albert Hall; more, she had declined to be included among the society hostesses who would receive the three thousand or more guests that night.

Why was that?

It was Hopford who asked the question, and he put it to Captain Preston. In short, while the social world of London for the most part worshiped at the shrine of the mysterious Jessica Mervyn-Robertson, Captain Preston, Hopford, Cora Hartsilver, Yootha Hagerston and George Blenkiron were banding themselves together—a little group of skeptics determined to find out who Jessica actually was, and who her friends were.

Perhaps had they known the sensation the approaching great ball at the Albert Hall held in store for them they would have hesitated before meddling with the affairs of Jessica Mervyn-Robertson, the idol of London Society.

CHAPTER XI.

HUSH MONEY!

You would think, judging by the newspapers, that the great balls which take place periodically in London at the Albert Hall and elsewhere presented scenes of wild delight approaching revelry. Many, in reality, are deadly dull affairs, and respectable beyond words, while others are so crowded that dancing becomes an impossibility. Of course there are always people who like to be "seen everywhere" in order to give their friends the impression that they are "in the swim" of London life, fashionable and otherwise. Such folk you will usually find to be *poseurs* of a peculiarly unintelligent type, the sort of men and women who are never natural, never "themselves" as it is called, and who act and talk always to impress those who may see or hear them.

Among the three thousand or more men and women who had bought tickets for the great ball organized and ostensibly to be given by Aloysius Stapleton and young Archie La Planta, were hundreds of people of that type, the class of individual who, before the war, loved to squander money and still more to let folk see how recklessly they squandered it. Stapleton, who knew his world, had purposely advertised his ball with a view to what he called "roping in" these people by making a great

to do regarding the many well-known social representatives who would be present, in addition to theatrical stars and other more or less Bohemian folk.

What he went nap on, however, were the social representatives. Like most people who move about he had noticed that since the war the glamor which in pre-war days enveloped well-advertised stage folk had faded considerably, and that, owing possibly to the sudden rise to affluence of profiteers and their wives and other beings of common origin and snobishly inclined, men and women of birth and breeding and real distinction now held the limelight almost entirely.

"I think I can say without conceit that it will be the most talked of event of its sort, not only of the present season, but of any season for years past," he observed complacently to Jessica, some days before the great night, "and I will admit that for that I am largely indebted to you, Jessica. By the way, I wish you would tell me what your dress is to be."

"Why waste time trying to make me tell you what I have already told you I am not going to tell you?" Jessica asked, as she lay back in a great soft fauteuil and blew a cloud of smoke into the middle of the room. "You will see enough of it on the night, I can assure you. Our supper party ought to be a great success," she added, changing the subject.

The telephone on the *escritoire* rang, and she went over to answer it.

"It is the Metropolitan Secret Agency," she said a moment later. "They want to speak to you."

Stapleton picked up the receiver, and as he did so the door opened and a middle-aged little man with a semetic cast of countenance was shown in.

It was the Hebrew, Levi Schomberg, who, Stapleton had told La Planta some weeks before, "lent money to his friends." He had told him at the same time that Schomberg had warned him against "Hartsilver's widow" on the ground that she was a designing woman.

Stapleton had difficulty in concealing his annoyance at Levi's arrival just as he was on the point of conversing with the house with the bronze face, and after replying to one or two questions which the Agency put to him he hung up the receiver and went across to Schomberg, with whom he shook hands.

"I need an extension to this house badly," he said pointedly to Jessica. "You might remind me to-morrow to see about it."

But Levi did not, or pretended that he did not note the point of that observation.

"And to what do I owe the honor of this visit?" Stapleton asked as he pushed an arm-chair towards Schomberg. "Is it business this time, or pleasure? And why have you come here instead of to my flat?"

"Some of each, and a little of both," the little man answered with a grin. "You guess what I come about, no doubt?"

"Not being mentally incapacitated as yet, I do," Stapleton answered, biting his lip. "I think you might have waited until after the ball on Thursday night," he added in a tone of annoyance.

"Several thought that when I approached them to-day," the Jew said slyly. "But, as I ask them, why after the ball instead of now? What is the matter with now? Isn't now good enough?"

"Well, out with it. How much do you want this time?"

"Eight thousand. Only eight thousand—this time."

Stapleton glared at him, and had anybody caught sight of Jessica at that moment he would have had difficulty in believing her to be the same woman, so distorted with fury had her face become.

"Eight thousand!" Stapleton exclaimed. "It's preposterous—I haven't the money."

Levi Schomberg made a little click with his tongue, which might have meant anything.

"I am sorry to hear that, Louie," he said carelessly. "Is it not strange that though you appear always to have unlimited cash to fling about, yet whenever I call to see you the cupboard is bare? Still, I need that sum, and you know that what I need I always end by getting, even if in order to get it I am forced to tighten the screw. Come now, when can you hand it to me? Shall we say to-morrow at twelve, at the same place as before?"

Stapleton had begun to pace the floor. Jessica, her fingers twitching nervously, watched him with an evil expression. It was easy to see that for some reason the man and the woman, usually so self-possessed, were in their visitor's power.

Thus a minute or two passed. Then, all at once,

Stapleton came to a halt and, turning sharply, faced Levi Schomberg.

"If I give you that sum, say on Friday—to-day is Tuesday—will you undertake, in writing, to stop this persecution?"

"In writing? Oh, no. Besides, I could not, in any case, promise to stop what you are pleased to call 'this persecution,' for where else should I go for the money? My demands are not exorbitant, Louie, judged by the length of your purse. Were you less rich, my requests would be moderated in proportion to your income. That, as I think you know, is my invariable rule. I find out exactly what my 'client's' income is from all sources, and I regulate my tariff accordingly. That is only fair and just. May I take it then that on—Friday——"

"Get out of my sight!"

"No, don't say that, don't employ that tone," the little Jew went on, in no way disconcerted. "I have news to give you—good news, Louie, think of that!"

He crossed his legs, and lay back in his chair. Then, thrusting his hands deep into his trousers pockets, he said:

"Louie—and Jessica," glancing at each in turn, "you will be happy to hear that though secret inquiries are being made about you on all sides, nothing, as the newspapers say, 'has as yet transpired.'"

"Who has been making inquiries?" Jessica asked quickly.

"Why, who but the lady to whom you are so

devoted—Cora Hartsilver, also her shadow, Yootha Hagerston, also a Captain Preston, also a young journalist named Hopford, and lastly a friend of the lot, whose name is Blenkiron. Those five have set themselves the task of discovering all about both of you, and about Archie, and I should not be surprised if presently they hit upon the right trail. If they don't hit it they won't fail for want of trying, and if by some mishap the *douceur* I have mentioned should go astray on Friday——”

“Good heavens, Levi, you wouldn't do that—you couldn't!”

Jessica had sprung to her feet and, abandoning her habitual calm, seemed beside herself.

“Naturally I wouldn't do it, though I disagree with you that I couldn't, Jessica,” the little man said in his even tones, partly closing his eyelids as though to get her profile in better perspective.

Jessica looked relieved.

“Always supposing,” he went on, “you keep your part of the bargain.”

“Bargain!” Stapleton exclaimed. “I never made a bargain. You wanted me to, but I refused—we both refused. You can't have forgotten that!”

“I forget everything I don't wish to remember,” Levi replied, his eyes now only slits. “Jessica, you look very beautiful to-day—more beautiful than you have ever looked, or than I have ever seen you look. I am not surprised that London raves about you.”

He rose before she could reply, and extended his

hand, which she took reluctantly. He held it a moment longer than the occasion seemed to warrant, then dropped it.

"On Friday, then," he said, addressing Stapleton. "On Thursday night we may not meet, you will both be so very busy, or should I say so much in demand? Unless of course you invite me to join your party. So good-by for the moment."

Stapleton did not go down to see him out, nor did he ring for the servant. Instead, he shut the door directly the little man had left the room.

The front door slammed, and still the two sat in silence. At last Jessica said in a metallic voice:

"What are we to do, Aloysius?"

"There is nothing to be done," he answered. "We must go on paying, and paying, until——"

"Until what?"

Suddenly his expression changed. Then, after a pause, he said:

"Supposing Levi were to die unexpectedly; how convenient it would be, Jessica."

Their eyes met, and he knew that the same thought had just occurred to Jessica.

"People die suddenly of all sort of common complaints," he went on. "Heart failure, apoplexy, stoppage of the heart's action, natural causes—— Supposing he died of a natural cause," he added in an undertone.

"Supposing! Well, it would mean one Hebrew less in the world."

"And many thousands of pounds left in our pockets

which, under existing conditions, will have to come out of them."

"It is worth considering."

"Certainly."

"As long as he remains alive, remember, we shall be subjected to repetitions of the sort of visit he has just paid us."

And, while they talked, Levi Schomberg, threading his way along the crowded pavement of Oxford Street, had but one thought in his mind.

Jessica.

He had always admired her, but now she had completely bewitched him. Surely—surely with the woman in his power, and with Stapleton, too, in his power, anything and everything should be possible? But how set about it? What would be his best and most direct mode of attack?

Another thought came to him. Where was Mervyn-Robertson? He knew the fellow was not dead, but what had become of him, and in what corner of the world was he at that moment? If only he could find out, Robertson himself might be employed in some capacity to achieve his end. When he had last heard of Robertson, some years before, the man had been in dire straits, and when a man of his type and way of living came to be in dire straits, he reflected, he generally remained in that state until the end of the chapter.

Then there was Mrs. Hartsilver. Hating Jessica, and striving all she knew to find out all about her, she might serve sooner or later as a useful lever.

When two women, both beautiful, and both moving in the same social circle, come to entertain a bitter enmity for each other, anything may happen, or be made to happen, he reflected. And Jessica had other enemies as well among "the people who count," he remembered. Yes, with the aid of a little tact, a little ingenuity——

People passing glanced at him in astonishment, wondering why he smiled.

He wandered into the Park at Marble Arch, for it was a beautiful afternoon and the sight of the trees in full foliage always appealed to his artistic eye. Scores of cars containing people obviously of leisure kept rolling past, and as he watched them his imagination wove romances round some of the occupants of the cars. Among the faces many were familiar to him; he recognized two of his clients.

A self-satisfied smile parted his lips.

"Who would think, to look at them," he said aloud, "they would not have a shilling in the world if I chose to foreclose? Yet there are folk who no doubt envy them, and tradesmen who would not hesitate to give them credit—big credit—unlimited credit. Fools, oh, what fools there are! Was it not Thackeray who wrote that 'long customs, a manly appearance, faultless boots and clothes and a happy fierceness of manner' would often help a man as much as a great balance at his bankers?"

"How true!" he went on murmuring to himself. "Here in London a man or a woman need only dress in the height of fashion in clothes they never pay for,

and hire a big car and pretend they own it, and be seen in good society, and the world bows down before them and craves to do them homage. Look at Stapleton and that young ass Archie La Planta, and a dozen others—to say nothing of Jessica.”

“Ah, Jessica!”

CHAPTER XII.

YOOTHA'S PRESENTIMENT.

MEANWHILE Yootha Hagerston was secretly becoming more and more enamored of Captain Preston. It was the first time in her life she had ever really cared for any man; until now she had followed the fashion prevalent among many women of pretending to consider love and deep affection "all nonsense" and the hall-mark of a weak intelligence. She had come to know his movements and had discovered some of his haunts, with the result that she rarely missed an opportunity of meeting him "by chance."

And, though he would not have admitted it, even to himself, Preston had for some weeks past been singularly attracted by Yootha. He had liked her that day he had met her for the first time, at lunch at the Ritz and afterwards at Jessica's musical *At Home*, though the woman who had most interested him then had been Yootha's friend, Cora Hartsilver. But now it was different. There was something about the girl, apart from her looks, which appealed to him. What it was he could not have explained. It might have been her sympathetic nature, or her personality, or her temperament; in any case he felt strangely drawn towards her every time they met.

On the lovely July afternoon Levi Schomberg had

called to see Jessica and Stapleton, and had afterwards wandered into the Park, Yootha was on the river with Preston. A friend of his whose home was at Pangbourne had, he had told her, on being suddenly ordered abroad, told him he could, during his absence, make use of his punt if ever he felt inclined to; though Preston had himself just rented a houseboat which was moored close to Maidenhead. Until now he had not felt inclined; punting alone is a dull form of amusement, and Preston had comparatively few friends in London. Then one day, while thinking of Yootha, the idea had occurred to him that she might like a river picnic from time to time, and he had hinted as much to her; Pangbourne was more solitary than Maidenhead he reflected.

They were in a narrow estuary—it was not a backwater—with the punt moored to a tree, and for some moments neither had spoken. No sound, save of birds singing in the woods around, broke the almost perfect stillness. The air was sultry, as though thunder were in the air.

“How fortunate I should have accepted La Planta’s invitation to lunch at the Ritz that day last August,” Preston said suddenly. “I did not want to lunch with him, I remember, but now I am glad I did.”

“Why are you glad?” she asked, looking across at him. She was lying in the stern, propped up with cushions, and made a pretty picture in her big hat and the becoming boating frock which revealed her figure.

He gazed at her without answering. Then, as if to conceal his embarrassment, he began to light his briar.

"Oh, I don't know," he replied awkwardly, tossing the match into the water. "That was the first time I met you, if you remember."

If she remembered! Could she ever forget? That was the thought which flashed into her brain, but she did not utter it. Instead, she said carelessly:

"So it was. And the first time you met Jessica, too, wasn't it?"

He made an impatient movement.

"Please don't remind me of that. Every time I think of that woman I feel positively vicious."

"I thought that day," Yootha continued, after a pause, "that you had eyes for nobody but Cora. You do like Cora, don't you?"

"Of course I like her, though not, perhaps, as much as you like her. Nobody could help liking her—nobody who counts."

"I am glad you say that. In my opinion she is the one woman in the world. I simply worship her, and always have. She is so true, so absolutely free from insincerity. You never met her husband, I think?"

"No—fortunately."

"Why fortunately?"

"From what I have heard about him he must have been a terrible outsider. Was she very unhappy with him?"

"Very. They ought never to have married. Myself, I hated him. He was so selfish, so self-satisfied, in short such a bounder. I ought not, I suppose, to say that of a dead man, but I can't help it. He was odious. I know you would have thought so had you known him."

Preston went on sucking at his pipe for some moments, without speaking. Presently his eyes met Yootha's. He tried to look away, but could not. And then, all at once, the girl gave a curious little laugh. It was so unlike her to laugh apparently at nothing, that Preston laughed too.

"What are we both laughing at?" she exclaimed, suddenly recovering. She had colored unexpectedly, and Preston noticed that the hand which hung over the side of the punt trembled.

"I can't think," he said. "I fancy I was laughing because I feel so happy."

"Do you really," she asked, and he saw that her chest rose and fell beneath the flimsy material she wore. "I wonder why?"

"Your cigarette had gone out," he remarked inconsequently. "Try one of mine. I think you will like them."

He stood up in the punt, and, balancing himself carefully, stepped over to where she lay. Then, kneeling beside her, he held out the case which he had produced from his pocket.

He sat close to her when he had lit her cigarette. Somehow her proximity seemed to agitate him. He wanted to speak, to go on conversing on ordinary

topics, as they had been, but words refused to come.

And at that instant a drop of rain splashed upon the punt. Without their noticing it the sky had become overcast. Heavy drops followed in quick succession, and then, without warning, a flash almost blinded them, and on the same instant a peal of thunder crackled overhead and all around them like rifle fire.

When they had set out, early in the afternoon, the sky had been cloudless, so that neither had coats or wraps. Just in time Preston snatched up his jacket and flung it over Yootha, a moment later rain came down like a shower in the tropics.

Pulling the punt in closer under the bank to get what shelter was obtainable, Preston looked down anxiously at his companion to whom his thin jacket afforded but scant protection. She was smiling up at him and looked perfectly contented, save for her anxiety about his getting drenched.

And still the rain poured down. Judging by the sky, it was not going to stop very soon. Flash after flash lit up the surrounding fields, and the thunder pealed almost incessantly. And then all at once, to add to their discomfort, wind began to rise.

That storm, as some may remember, was said to be the worst London had known for twenty years. It lasted throughout the night and well on into the following morning, wreaking havoc in the metropolis and in the provinces, and particularly up the Thames valley.

And it was a storm which Preston and Yootha

Hagerston are not likely to forget, for it broke down the barrier of reserve between them so effectually that by the time they got home that evening in a car—which Preston with great difficulty succeeded in chartering—they were to all intents engaged.

Thinking over, next day, the events of the previous afternoon, Preston smiled at the thought of all that had occurred. Had anybody told him in the morning that within four-and-twenty hours he would be engaged to be married, he could have laughed the speaker to scorn. Yet, as so often happens, the seemingly impossible had come about, and he began seriously to review the situation.

Yes, he was happy. Very happy. Of that he felt convinced. Often in his time he had met a girl with whom he thought he might be happy should she consent to become his wife, but he had never felt sufficiently sure of himself to propose. And now he thanked heaven for that diffidence, for he knew the only woman in the world he had ever really wanted as a wife was Yootha Hagerston.

They did not meet again until the following afternoon. He had telephoned about noon to ask if she would have tea with him at his rooms in Fig Tree Court, and her reply was what might have been expected.

"My darling," he exclaimed, folding her in his arms and pressing her lips to his as they met in the little passage which his servant called "the hall." "If you knew how happy you have made me, how I now realize that for weeks past I have wanted you to become mine—mine for ever——"

He stopped, for she was sobbing, clinging to him as though she could never let him go.

"What is it? What is the matter?" he exclaimed in alarm, raising her face from his shoulder and trying to look into her eyes. "Why are you crying, Yootha?"

And then, all at once, he realized that her tears were tears of happiness.

"Only one thing makes me anxious, Charlie," she said later, after tea, "and that is that something may come between us—and prevent our marriage. I don't know why, but I have a presentiment, a sort of feeling—oh, I can't explain, I don't know what it is, I hardly know what I am saying I feel so happy, so absolutely and perfectly happy. But can we hurry on the wedding, dearest? Couldn't we be married by special license, or something. I don't want to wait a day longer, not an hour longer than is absolutely necessary. Life is so uncertain, you know, and such strange and unlooked-for things sometimes happen. Tell me, Charlie, must we go to the ball Thursday night?"

"At the Albert Hall? I am afraid I must, darling, because I have made up a party, as you know. Don't you want to go? I thought you were looking forward to it."

"I was, but now I would rather not go. Still, if you must go, of course, I'll come with you. But I shall be glad when it is over. I can't think why, but the thought of that ball now seems somehow to frighten me. It didn't until we became engaged."

But Preston soon dispelled her fancies. She was excited, he said, unstrung. "What could happen to anybody at a ball at the Albert Hall?" he exclaimed, laughing. He had been in hotter places in France and had come through all right—except for that bit of shrapnel in his leg. Yes, he agreed with her that it would be best for the news of their engagement not to be announced until her parents had been informed.

"How do you think they will take it?" he asked. "Will they be pleased, or not?"

"Probably not," she answered lightly. "At least, if they are pleased, it will be the first time they have ever approved of anything I have done on my own initiative. And then there is the question of money. I have a small income of my own, as you know, and lately I inherited a comfortable little nest egg, and my stepmother naturally hopes that in the ordinary course of events I may some day make over some of my capital to her and to my father. Our marriage will dispel that delusion," and she laughed.

"You say naturally," Preston said, "but I think it most unnatural she should think anything of the sort."

"Ah, you don't know my stepmother. But let us change the subject. Whenever I begin to think about my stepmother something unpleasant is sure to happen. Don't think me superstitious. I am not, as a rule, but on that point I am extremely superstitious, because what I say has often happened."

As they came out into Fleet Street, a little later, they met Hopford hurrying to his office.

"Sorry I can't wait," he said, "but I've got hold of something rather good to-day, something which will interest you both, by the way, and I have to write the story before seven. See you at the ball on Thursday, I suppose?"

"You have promised to have supper with us there," Preston said with a laugh.

"So I have! I shouldn't have forgotten it on Thursday night, you may be sure. It ought to be a festive evening."

He raised his hat and turned down Whitefriar's Street, and Preston looked about for a taxi. But there was not one to be seen which was disengaged.

Presently he glanced at his watch.

"I have to meet a man in Bloomsbury at six o'clock," he said, "and it is now half-past five. Would you care to walk that far with me, darling?"

She answered that she would "adore to," and so it came about that, on turning out of Russell Square, Preston pointed out a house to her on the opposite side of the street.

"That is a house you must often have heard about," he said. "They call it the house with the bronze face. It is the headquarters of the famous Metropolitan Secret Agency."

Yootha looked across at it with interest.

"What a horrible knocker!" she exclaimed. "Isn't the face awful? I have heard Cora and the others speak about the place. She went there recently,

as you know, to try to find out about Jessica, and she expects to hear soon. She described the knocker to me then. No wonder it has given the house a curious reputation—I mean the stories that are told about it. But they are all nonsense, I suppose?" she ended, looking at Preston.

"Of course they must be, though the fact that Lord Froissart called there on the morning of the day he committed suicide has probably given the tales about the house a fresh lease of life. I can't stand superstitious people, can you? I am glad you are not superstitious, dearest."

Yootha laughed uneasily.

"It's a gloomy, depressing-looking house, anyway," she said, changing the subject as she glanced back at the door. "And it has a mysterious look. But I think a detective agency always sounds mysterious."

"The people who run the Secret Agency must be extraordinarily clever," Preston said. "The number of criminals they have brought to book is said to be very large, though the agency has not been in existence many years. I heard a rumor some days ago that they are now hot on the scent of the thieves who stole Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's jewels out of her safe during one of her evening parties."

"Mr. Hopford seems to be very interested in that affair," Yootha observed. "Now, I wonder if he had heard anything about it when we met him in Fleet Street? He said what he was going to write would be of interest to us both."

They had now arrived at the house where Preston had an appointment. An empty taxi was passing, and he hailed it.

"Then we shall meet Thursday night," he said, when he had handed Yootha into the taxi and shut the door. "Cora is going to call for me in her car at ten o'clock, and we shall pick you up on our way to the ball."

CHAPTER XIII.

BOX NUMBER THIRTEEN.

OF all the balls that have been given at Albert Hall within the past ten or twelve years, none has approached in its splendor, or in the luxury of its appointment and setting "the pageant worthy of Ancient Rome," as some of the newspapers termed it, which took place in July, 1919.

The whole of the interior of the vast building had been painted and decorated in an amazingly artistic manner, and utterly regardless of expense. All the seasons were presented in turn in a gigantic panorama, which depicted also the most daring love scenes described in the well-known classics. True, a few London journals and many provincial papers clamored to know why so huge a sum should have been spent on "decking out" one great ball-room, seeing that the ball had been organized "ostensibly in aid of charity," but the cavillers received no answer. Heckled on the point by a Parliamentary representative of advanced Socialistic views, Stapleton calmly replied that "if you set out to make money you must spend money to make it," an argument which proved its soundness when the accounts came to be totaled up and an enormous sum was handed to charity.

Long before the night every ticket had been sold.

Nor could another be obtained for love or money. By midnight the immense circle of boxes sparkled with a blaze of diamonds, worn, on that occasion, not by decrepit dowagers, as is the case so often at the Opera, but for the most part by young and extremely beautiful women. Indeed, it was safe to say that literally everybody who was anybody attended at the Albert Hall that night, though as the faces of all were concealed by masks which they were at liberty to wear throughout the night if so inclined, even detectives would have been unable to say who was present and who absent had they been ordered to make a report.

Preston's party, which included Cora Hartsilver and Yootha Hagerston, Harry Hopford, George Blenkiron, and about a dozen more, occupied a box only six boxes away from Jessica Mervyn-Robertson's. Her party, too, numbered about a dozen, and her first appearance in the hall created a sensation which few present that night are likely to forget.

Her dress! In the first place, of what did it consist? Certainly of very little, but that little——

A great mottled snake with enormous eyes which, as the rays of the electroliers caught them, assumed chameleon tints, becoming now a jet black, now a sea green blending into different shades, now golden copper, now blood red . . .

That was the impression which first struck the beholder as Jessica came towards him.

In reality the "gown" was a mottled skin which

fitted like a glove, and from a distance conveyed the impression that it was covered with real scales. But a closer inspection showed that the skin ended half-way up the chest and back, the "scales" design being continued on the bare flesh and painted thereon so marvelously that where skin ended and flesh began could be discerned only with difficulty. The great chameleon eyes which at first riveted the attention of all beholders were on the mask itself, which hid her face entirely, and exactly resembled the head of a giant puff adder. Indeed, Jessica's costume, if costume it could be called, was by far the most bizarre in the whole of that vast assemblage, where weird and decadent gowns were plentiful enough.

"Who can the woman with that horrible snake costume and the extraordinary eyes be?" Yootha said as she leaned forward in Preston's box and scanned the astonishing vision through her opera glasses. "Have you ever seen anything more abominable, Charlie?"

"A good many of the dresses here are abominable, in my opinion," Preston answered, "and plenty of the men's costumes might with advantage have been scrapped. Look at that creature over there with nothing on, apparently, but a woman's silk swimming suit. I wonder what he did during the war, or if he did anything?"

"You do harp on that, Charlie," Yootha said almost impatiently. "After all, the war is over, so what does it matter what people wear at a cos-

tume ball, so long as their costumes are not obviously indecent or decadent, like that woman's snake skin. Look, she is coming towards us."

Escorted by male companions, the mottled snake approached. They were close to Preston's box now, and as they passed they walked more slowly and stared up through their masks apparently straight at his party. A little shudder ran through Yootha. Why, she did not know, and as it did so the horrible chameleon eyes turned from copper to deep crimson.

"I must, at any cost, find out who that is," Hopford murmured. "I already have my suspicion; the attitude that tall man with her is standing in now is quite familiar."

"Oh, do find out," Yootha exclaimed. "I am dying to know. Why, they have that box close to ours," she added as Jessica and her companions joined the remainder of their party. "The box attendant will surely be able to tell you, Mr. Hopford."

"The little man at the back is unmistakable, anyhow," Hopford said as he kept his eyes riveted on the party. "Twenty masks couldn't disguise him! It's Levi Schomberg, the Jew moneylender, who is said to lend thousands to all the 'best' people in Society, cabinet ministers not excepted. There shouldn't be much difficulty in finding out now," and rising, he excused himself and left the box.

He soon found the attendant of the box occupied by Jessica and her party, and, having slipped some money into the man's hand he asked him if he would tell Mr. Levi Schomberg that he was wanted.

"And who shall I say, sir?" the attendant in-

quired, looking into the eyes which fixed him through the mask.

"Say a 'gentleman,' and that it is important."

In a minute the attendant returned, accompanied by the little Jew who, dressed as a troubadour, presented a far more grotesque figure than he supposed.

"Yes?" he said as he came up. "You wish to speak to me? Who are you?"

He had not removed his mask, and the little black eyes seemed to burn with curiosity behind it.

"I am sorry to disturb you," Hopford said, "but *The Evening Herald* wants to know if it would be possible to obtain a flashlight photograph of Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson in the striking gown she is wearing to-night."

Schomberg snorted.

"I am certain," he answered, "that Mrs. Robertson would not consent to be photographed by the *Evening Herald* or any other paper, so it would be useless for me to ask her."

He was about to turn away, when he checked himself.

"Why did you ask for me instead of for Mrs. Robertson?" he asked sharply.

Hopford laughed.

"I leave that conundrum to you to answer," he said. "Good night, Mr. Schomberg," and he went off elated at his success, while the Jew stood looking after him with a scowl which his mask concealed.

Hopford had suspected from the first the identity

of the "snake woman," as people now called her; the dress was being greatly talked about. Now he would be able to enlighten Yootha Hagerston; also in his paper next day he would, he told himself, boldly name the wearer of the very daring costume.

As the night wore on, the noise and merriment increased. Certainly no Albert Hall ball had ever been less decorous. The most modern and the most peculiar dances followed one another in quick succession. Yet though the floor looked packed it was not unduly crowded.

Blenkiron stood apart with his friend, Captain Preston, whose wounded leg precluded his dancing.

"I should like to possess a sum equivalent to a year's interest on the value of all the diamonds and other jewelry here to-night," he said lightly. "It would set some of us up for life!"

"And the war was supposed to have impoverished the nation!" Preston observed dryly. "This sort of show isn't much in my line, George."

"Or in mine. But Cora is enjoying it, and Yootha too. Smart of Hopford to have discovered the identity of the woman in the snake costume—eh? I bet she'll be annoyed when she sees her name in his paper to-morrow."

"You think so? Why?"

"My dear fellow, would any woman with the least self-respect not be ashamed to let it be known she wore a dress like that in public?"

"A woman with the least self-respect—yes. But has Jessica the least self-respect?"

"Well, we know nothing against her, do we? We only think we have reason to suspect she may not be—well, all she poses to be. Queer her entertaining that Jew moneylender, don't you think?"

"She may have a reason."

"A woman with her income!"

"How do we know what her income is? Plenty of people with no money at all spend recklessly. She may be up to her ears in debt, and her friend Stapleton, too. The slim man talking to Stapleton is, I suppose, La Planta."

They looked in the direction where two men, masked like the rest, were engaged in earnest conversation.

"I have not yet overcome my aversion from that young man," Preston said as he watched them. "Every time I speak to him I feel he rings untrue. Ah, here come Yootha and Harry."

Yootha, flushed with the night's excitement, had probably never looked better. Her eyes shone with pleasure, for Hopford was an excellent dancer. It was nearly two in the morning now, and the revels were at their height.

Presently the band struck up the newest Jazz, a wild combination of almost every sound capable of being produced by musical and unmusical instruments, a sort of savage discord in many keys which clashed and blared to the accompaniment of human cries and trombone laughter. Carried away by what passed for music, the dancers who now thronged the floor performed the strangest evolu-

tions. Some, locked in a close embrace, seemed oblivious of all but their own emotions as they gyrated in never-ending circles; others, barely touching, went through contortions which in any other place and under any other circumstances would have shocked some beholders, filled some with disgust, and convulsed the remainder with amusement.

It was in the middle of this performance that a strange thing occurred. Happening to look in the direction of Jessica's box, now temporarily deserted, Preston noticed two men in it. One he quickly recognized by his costume to be Levi Schomberg; the other . . .

"George," he said, turning to Blenkiron, "that thin man bending over Levi Schomberg—the fellow dressed as a troubadour we decided must be Schomberg, didn't we?—is that La Planta, do you think?"

Blenkiron looked in the direction indicated.

"Hopford declared him to be La Planta," he said.

"Well, what is he doing—I mean Schomberg, the man sitting down?"

Blenkiron watched him for some moments.

"He's drunk, I should say," he answered.

"Drunk! Not a bit of it. Look at his attitude."

"It certainly is queer. Ah, La Planta has left him now. He is going out of the box. I can see Jessica outside waiting for him."

As Blenkiron stopped speaking, the man whom they believed to be La Planta, accompanied now by the mottled snake, walked quickly into the corridor behind the boxes, and were lost to sight.

Levi Schomberg, meanwhile, remained seated in

the box. Bent forward, and resting against the velvet balustrade, he appeared to be gazing at the crowded floor. None noticed him, apparently, but Preston and George Blenkiron, whose complete attention he now held.

"Strange," Blenkiron said at last, "how motionless he is. He has not stirred for fully five minutes."

They went on looking. When some more minutes had passed, and the figure still remained motionless, Preston linked his friend's arm in his own.

"Let us go and see if he is ill," he said. "I am sure something is amiss with him."

They went up the staircase and round to the back of the boxes until they reached the box they sought. The door was shut. After knocking several times, and receiving no answer, they went in search of the attendant.

"There is a gentleman alone in Box Thirteen," Preston said, "who appears to be ill. We have knocked repeatedly, but can get no reply."

"A friend of yours?" the attendant inquired.

"We know him, yes."

The Jazz band was blaring still as Preston and Blenkiron passed into the box, closely followed by the attendant. They spoke Schomberg's name, but he did not reply. Then they went over to him, and Blenkiron put a hand upon his shoulder.

Still he made no response. Now thoroughly on the alert Preston stripped off Schomberg's mask, then jumped back with a start.

To all it was at once obvious that the little Hebrew was dead!

CHAPTER XIV.

CONCERNS A NECKLACE.

"Look at that drunken ass being carried out of his box."

The speaker stood beside his partner on the floor of the hall, fanning her with an ostrich plume.

The girl laughed.

"Why can't you men keep sober?" she said, only partly in jest. They remained watching Levi and those assisting him until the group passed out of the box and was lost to sight.

Others had watched him too, and because the conclusion they had all jumped at was that the fellow, whoever he might be, had drunk too much, the incident of his sudden death caused no commotion, and the ball went on as gaily as though nothing untoward had occurred.

Stretched on a sofa in the secretary's office, Schomberg lay strangely stiff, seeing that he could not have been dead over half an hour. A doctor had been discovered among the dancers, and, dressed to resemble a well-known comedian, he presented a ludicrous figure as he bent over the dead man, listening through his stethoscope. Presently he straightened himself and shook his head.

"Quite dead," he said. "Who is he? Does anybody know anything about him?"

He looked about at the various people standing by.

"It's Levi Schomberg," Preston said. "He was one of Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's guests. It was her box we found him in."

"Mervyn-Robertson? You mean the woman they call Jessica?" the doctor asked with a curious look.

"Yes."

"May I ask if she is a friend of yours?"

"I know her to speak to," Preston answered, "so does my friend here, but I can't say she is a friend of ours. To what do you attribute death, doctor?"

"I can't say at off-hand. Heart, most likely; the heat and general excitement may have induced the final attack. We must communicate with his friends. Are they here?"

"I believe so. I don't know Schomberg myself."

"I thought the attendant said you were both friends of his."

"We told the attendant we knew him, to get into the box. We could see from the hall that something was amiss with him."

"How could you? Hadn't he a mask on?"

"Yes, but we had discovered his identity early in the evening."

"Indeed? You will forgive my asking, but what made you take so much interest in this man whom you say you knew only by sight?"

Preston hesitated. Then he said awkwardly:

"Nothing in particular."

"Oh, come," the doctor exclaimed, "you must have had a reason. Nobody tries to discover who disguised people are for no reason. You had better tell me."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Well, as you put it that way, I had better tell you there are one or two curious features surrounding this man's death. On the face of it he would appear to have died of natural causes, but certain points tend to dispel that theory. For instance, *rigor mortis* would not have set in so quickly had death been due to natural causes, such as stoppage of the heart's action. There will have to be an inquest."

The authorities having been notified of the occurrence, about half an hour later Preston and Blenkiron, accompanied by the doctor, whose name was Johnson, returned to the hall. None of the revelers had as yet left, apparently, for the floor was as thronged with dancers as when they had been there last.

"Point me out the box where he was found, will you?" Johnson said presently.

"That is the one," Blenkiron replied, indicating it, "next to the box with the woman with scarlet plumes."

"There are people in it now," Johnson observed. "Do you know who they are? Why, one of them is that snake woman everybody has been talking about."

"We are under the impression, though we don't

know for certain," Preston replied guardedly, "that the snake woman is Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson herself, and that the man talking to her is called Stapleton."

"Do you mean Aloysius Stapleton, the organizer of this ball?"

"Yes."

"Well, if Schomberg was one of their party they apparently have not heard what has happened, and somebody ought to tell them."

"Hadn't you better tell them, Doctor Johnson?"

"I suppose I must. And as you and your friend rendered 'first aid' you had better come with me to confirm my statements."

Jessica and the woman and the three men with them still wore their masks, though some of the dancers had now discarded theirs. When Doctor Johnson and his companions were admitted to the box, Jessica and her friends were in the highest spirits. Jessica herself was laughing loudly, while two of the men had become uproarious. The doctor had sent in his card and asked if he might speak to Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson alone, but she had sent out word that he had better come into the box.

"Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson, I believe?" he said, addressing her.

"Now, who told you that, Doctor Johnson?" she exclaimed, still laughing, and her friends laughed too. "All night I have tried to retain my incognita, but people one after another have penetrated

it. Sit down and have some champagne, won't you?" and she pushed a chair towards him. He saw at once that she herself had drunk as much champagne as was good for her.

"Thank you very much," he said, "but I won't, if you will excuse me. I would sooner have said in private, Mrs. Robertson, what I have to tell you, but as you have insisted on my coming in I must tell it to you here. One of your guests to-night was, I believe, a Mr. Schomberg?"

"Yes," she answered. "Why, what has become of him?" she added, looking round. "We have not seen him for quite a long time. Mr. Johnson you might introduce your friends," as Preston and Blenkiron still stood in the background.

"I will in a moment. But first I have some rather dreadful news to break to you, Mrs. Robertson. You must brace yourself for a shock. Mr. Schomberg has died suddenly. He died here, in this box, less than an hour ago."

At once everybody grew solemn. The party became hushed.

"Levi—*dead!*" Jessica gasped after a pause. "It is impossible. He was here only just now, and quite well!"

"An hour ago," Johnson corrected. "I was sent for, and I found Mr. Schomberg lying on the sofa in the secretary's office, dead."

"But where did he die? And who found him?"

"As I say, he died in this box, where he was found by these two gentlemen, whom I think you know,"

and he turned to the masked figures at his elbow, "Mr. Blenkiron and Captain Preston."

As his name was mentioned, it struck Preston that Jessica gave a little start. He told Blenkiron afterwards, however, that he could have sworn she did.

Jessica bowed.

"But how did you come to be in this box?" she asked, looking up at them from where she sat.

"I must apologize for our having intruded, Mrs. Robertson," Preston said, "but how it happened was this," and he went on to explain how he and Blenkiron, noticing that the masked man sitting alone in her box appeared to be unwell, had obtained admittance to the box.

"That was most kind of you," Jessica said when he stopped speaking. "But really this news is too terrible. I can't realize it. Poor Levi! And he seemed so well to-night, and in such excellent spirits."

She stopped abruptly.

"I wonder who it was sent in to see him early in the evening?" she said after a pause. "He seemed put out when he came back, and didn't volunteer to tell anybody what was amiss, so of course I couldn't ask him. But he got all right again a little later."

"That would hardly have any bearing on the cause of death, Mrs. Robertson."

It was Johnson who spoke. He was looking hard

at her through the holes in his mask. Apparently through forgetfulness he had not taken it off.

"No, of course it wouldn't," Jessica answered mechanically. Her thoughts seemed to be far away. "Tell me, Doctor Johnson," she said suddenly, in a different tone, "to what cause do you attribute his sudden death?"

"At first I attributed it to natural causes, but afterwards I changed my opinion," he replied in measured tones.

He was still looking hard at her.

"And what made you change your opinion?"

"One or two things which would take too long to explain. No doubt the actual cause will be arrived at during the inquest."

"There will be an inquest, then?"

Preston fancied her voice trembled a little.

"In the circumstances there will have to be."

"You mean you think he took his life—and by poison?"

"Oh, no, Mrs. Robertson, you mistake me. But there is no need to go further into the matter now. You would like, I dare say, to view the body presently."

"Must I?"

"Certainly not, unless you wish to. I thought perhaps you might wish to."

"I would much sooner not. The whole thing has upset me terribly, as I am sure it has upset us all."

She leant forward, poured herself out a glass of champagne, and emptied the glass at a draught.

"Captain Preston and Mr. Blenkiron," she said, "do help yourselves, and you too, Doctor Johnson. I am sure this affair must have given you all a shock."

Once more Preston and his friend were mingling in the gay throng. Doctor Johnson had left them after thanking them for their services and saying they would no doubt be called to give evidence at the inquest. A little group at one of the tables in the big supper-room were talking in animated tones, and Preston happened to overhear scraps of their conversation.

"Yes, a woman has been arrested . . . was arrested ten minutes ago . . . the pearls were found in her possession. The man with her . . . became furiously indignant, declared he had been with her all the night. Then she was confronted with the owner of the necklace, who swore she had sat beside her at supper . . . the thief, or alleged thief, is quite a girl . . . yes, I was standing by when they took her mask off . . ."

"Who is she? Have you any idea?" somebody asked.

"None at all. You can stake your life though, that at a show of this sort there are bound to be professional crooks about. Look at the diamonds here to-night! They must run into fortunes and fortunes. Well, here's luck to us all, and I hope . . ."

That was as much as Preston heard and it did not interest him greatly. Since leaving Jessica's box he had been looking for Yootha, whom he had

seen last with Cora Hartsilver. But their box was now empty, from which he concluded they were all dancing. Hopford, too, he had not come across for some time. Preston knew that Hopford and Yootha were engaged for several dances.

In the crowd Preston had lost sight of Blenkiron, and he now threaded his way alone and aimlessly through the little groups of dancers clustered together and resting. The band had become more riotous than ever, the dancing more extravagant and grotesque. And all the while, as he made his way along, he kept thinking of Schomberg and his strange death. Again he saw the masked young man stooping over the seated figure bent forward in the box and apparently leaning against it. The figure had not moved then, neither had it moved during the minutes which elapsed before he and Blenkiron had gone up to the box to ascertain if anything were amiss. Could Schomberg already have been dead when the slim man stood bending over him? If so, then why had the latter not sent for a doctor, or raised the alarm?

And that slim young man, according to Hopford, had been La Planta. Perhaps, though, Hopford had been mistaken. Then he thought of Jessica. How surprised and distressed she had appeared to be when Doctor Johnson had broken to her the news of Schomberg's death. That she should be was, of course, only natural in the circumstances, and yet——

What had become of Yootha? Where in the

world had she got to? And Cora, too, and Hopford? Perhaps Hopford had gone back to the office of his newspaper; he had said he might have to go.

In vain he watched the dancers—swaying, revolving, always revolving, until the scene made him dizzy. But he saw no sign of Yootha, or of any of his party. At intervals he glanced at the box they had occupied, but it remained empty. He was getting sick of the whole thing, and longed to get back home. But he could not go home without first seeing Yootha. He felt he had seen less of her that evening than he had hoped to do; but then she loved dancing, and he would, he told himself, have been a bear to prevent her dancing because himself unable, owing to his wounded leg, to dance at all.

Suddenly his spirits rose. He had caught sight of Hopford . . . he was some way off . . . Ah, there he was again! Wandering, he appeared to be in search of some one. And at that instant Hopford saw him.

“Charlie, for heaven’s sake—I have been hunting for you everywhere,” Hopford exclaimed when at last they came together. “An awful thing has happened—it will give you a big shock, but I implore you not to worry, because I am positive all will come right in the end. Cora knows about it and is with Yootha now.”

“Yootha? Where is she, Harry? I have been trying to find her for the last half an hour or more.”

"I can well believe that," Hopford answered. "Now listen, Charlie, and don't get upset. A woman had her pearl necklace stolen to-night, and the necklace has been found in Yootha's vanity bag, and so—well, of course they had to arrest her."

"Arrest her! *Arrest Yootha?*"

"Why yes. You see the pearls were found in her possession. Have you heard about Levi Schomberg, and——"

"Hang Levi Schomberg!" Preston cried out. "What the devil does Levi Schomberg matter—forgive me, Harry, here, take me to Yootha at once and let me see the police myself about this ridiculous trumped-up charge!"

CHAPTER XV.

SOME CROOKED QUESTIONS.

DURING the week which followed the papers gave special prominence to two items of news which interested their readers greatly. One was the strange death of Levi Schomberg, with an account of events which had immediately preceded it, and a record of his past career; the other was the arrest of Yootha Hagerston on a charge of stealing a pearl necklace owned by a woman named Marietta Stringborg, wife of Julius Stringborg, described as "formerly of Shanghai, spirit merchant, but now of Upper Bruton Street, London, and The Retreat, Maidenhead."

Schomberg's death, it seemed, was of rather a mysterious character, and the inquest lasted a considerable time. In the opinion of the coroner it had been due to natural causes, but Doctor Johnson strongly opposed that theory and advanced several significant points in his endeavor to disprove it.

First, there was the peculiarity of *de rigor mortis* having set in so soon; then the fact that all the organs were obviously healthy; then the singular appearance of the eyes, which, the doctor declared, had not resembled the eyes of a dead man when first he had examined the body; and, lastly, the condition of the blood. Very emphatically he maintained that the blood had an unusual tint. This

might, he admitted, easily have been overlooked; yet it undoubtedly existed, and he was at a loss to account for it. He admitted that the condition of the blood seemed healthy.

The coroner was one of those rather pig-headed men, who, having expressed an opinion, are loth in any circumstances to alter it. In any case, it was obvious to Preston and Blenkiron from the first that the coroner was not favorably disposed towards Doctor Johnson, and that every suggestion the latter made he endeavored to controvert.

"I confess," he observed pompously, when Johnson had pointed out very clearly why in his opinion death had not been due to natural causes, "that I completely fail to follow your line of argument. Furthermore, what possible reason could any person or persons have had for wishing to hasten the death of so respectable a citizen as deceased appears to have been, in spite of his unsavory calling? In my opinion the idea that death was due to other than natural causes is preposterous. Had the unfortunate man taken poison, or had poison been administered, traces of it must have been found. As it is, no trace of any sort of poison has been discovered, and therefore, if you will forgive my speaking bluntly, Doctor Johnson, I consider that your speculations are hypercritical—or let us say beside the mark."

Johnson shrugged his shoulders.

"In that case," he replied, "I have nothing further to say."

"Quite so. I am glad to hear you say that."

Johnson opened his mouth as if about to speak again; then changed his mind and remained silent. "What is the use," was his mental comment, "of arguing with such a person?"

And so, after all, a verdict of "death from natural causes" was returned, and Johnson, feeling extremely dissatisfied, left the Court accompanied by Blen-iron and Captain Preston.

It was the second of these two incidents, however, which had interested Preston far more than the first, had, indeed, engrossed almost the whole of his attention since the night of the ball—the arrest of Yootha Hagerston. Though finally acquitted, she had undergone intense mental suffering during the time she had been kept under observation. And naturally people had talked. Many, in fact, had not yet finished talking. Among the latter was Jessica Mervyn-Robertson.

Perhaps the truth of the old saying that "if you throw mud enough, some of it is sure to stick," had never been better illustrated than in connection with Yootha's arrest on a charge of theft. Women in particular discussed the affair, and during such discussions eyebrows were raised significantly, and there were plenty of little smiles which implied more than any spoken words could have done.

"Had she been a poor woman, instead of what we call a lady," the hackneyed observation was trotted out again, "she would be in prison now, my dear," a faded creature who had always toadied to rich

people observed to Jessica during a few moments' conversation they had in Bond Street one morning. "Mrs. Stringborg is a friend of yours, isn't she?"

Jessica replied that she had known her for some years.

"And what does she think about it?"

Jessica raised her eyebrows. Then, after an instant's pause, she said cryptically:

"She doesn't think."

The faded woman nodded.

"I understand," she purred. "She knows."

Jessica smiled. It was one of the significant smiles referred to, more deadly than spoken words.

And so they parted, Jessica with a smile upon her lips, and hatred still in her heart, the other woman reveling in her good fortune at having had this assurance, as she chose to consider it, direct from a friend of Marietta Stringborg's, that though Yootha had been acquitted she was guilty.

And Yootha?

Already she began to feel the draught in the mental atmosphere. Plenty of her friends remained true to her, of course, not giving a second thought to the suggestion that the pearls had been taken by her, but there were others . . .

Highly strung and extremely sensitive, she felt the difference in the "atmosphere" at every turn. The quick glances towards her and then away from her; the glances followed by whispers, and the whispers sometimes by smiles; the slight *hauteur*

of folk who up till then had greeted her always with effusion; the sudden crossing from her side of the street to the other by acquaintances who noticed her approaching—these and similar incidents affected her intensely, causing acute pain.

“It is too dreadful,” she exclaimed one night on her return with her friend, Cora Hartsilver, to the latter’s house in Park Crescent after the Opera. “I have been miserable to-night—miserable. I felt during the whole performance as if all the audience was staring at me, saying one to another: ‘There she is, that is the girl so much talked about who was charged with the theft of the necklace at the Albert Hall ball.’ And it was not all imagination, dear, for I distinctly heard my name whispered twice by people a row or two behind us. And then, did you see Jessica? She saw me directly we entered the theater, and I saw her turn in her box and speak to her friends and at once they all gathered nearer to hear what she had to say—while we walked down to our seats they all stared at me as hard as they could. . . . I felt like a criminal, Cora. I feel like a criminal still. . . .” and throwing her arms impetuously about her friend with her head on her shoulder she began to cry bitterly.

Cora consoled her as best she could, while in her own heart fury burned. It was fury at the thought, at the conviction she felt, that this injustice was not the outcome of misfortune, but that the whole thing had been deliberately planned, and that the person who had planned it had been

none other than Jessica. And why did Jessica hate Yootha so? There could, she told herself be but one reason—it was because Yootha was her friend. Jessica would, no doubt, have liked to cast suspicion of the robbery on herself, but, unable to do that, she had stabbed her through her friend. And, so thinking, Cora ground her teeth. More determined than ever did she become at that moment to find out everything about Jessica Mervyn-Robertson, and if possible shame her in the eyes of the world for ever.

“Don’t cry, my darling,” she said, as she gently stroked Yootha’s hair; Yootha’s arm still encircled her. “I have had a letter to-night from the house with the bronze face, and they are leaving no stone unturned to run the thief to ground. They ask me to call with you as soon as possible, as there are certain further questions they wish to put to you. Also, they say, they have something important to show you.”

“Let us go to-morrow morning,” Yootha exclaimed, looking up, and mopping her eyes. “And we might take Charlie with us; he will come if we ask him, I am sure.”

“I was about to suggest that,” Cora answered. “We will ring him up now. He said he would be back in town to-night, didn’t he? And it isn’t midnight yet.”

But the telephone remained silent.

Consequently they went alone next morning to the office of the Metropolitan Secret Agency.

The room into which they were shown was the office where Alix Stothert and Madame Camille Lenoir had been working late on the night Lord Froissart had so unexpectedly made his appearance; only now in the rooms adjoining many clerks were at work, and typing machines clattered. Only Stothert was in the room, and he looked up as they entered. Then, as he rose, he removed the eyeshade from his forehead.

"Good morning," he said solemnly. "Won't you sit down?" and he waved his hand in the direction of two chairs.

"I asked you to call," he went on at once, coming straight to the point, "because I wish to put one or two questions to Miss Hagerston verbally. Will you tell me, please," he turned to Yootha, "how long you have been engaged to be married to Captain Preston?"

The girl started.

"Who told you we were engaged?" she exclaimed, coloring. "Our engagement has not yet been announced in the papers."

"I am aware of that, but it is our business to know things before they are made public. How long, Miss Hagerston?"

"Ten days. But has this any bearing on the theft of the pearl necklace?"

"Indirectly—yes. And you made his acquaintance at lunch at the Ritz on August the ninth of last year, I think?"

"Yes."

"Since then you have met him frequently, I take it?"

"No, only of late."

"And for some time you have been friendly with a young man named Harry Hopwood, a newspaper correspondent?"

"I wouldn't say 'friendly.' I have met him from time to time."

"Now, there is a well-known Society woman with whom you and Mrs. Hartsilver are both acquainted—Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson. A little while ago you may remember, you and Mrs. Hartsilver came here to ask us to make private inquiries about Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's past life. Since then Mr. Hopford has called here on a similar mission, and Captain Preston and a Mr. George Blenkiron have done the same. We have found out certain things about the lady which we have reported to you all separately; other things we have found out which for private reasons we deem it inadvisable to tell you, at any rate for the moment. We should like to warn you, however, that the lady referred to has many influential friends, and we would venture to advise you to attempt as little as possible to pry into her private life. She is a dangerous woman, a very dangerous woman, though this, naturally I tell you in strictest confidence."

"Thank you," Yootha answered. "And now can you throw any light at all upon the mystery of the stolen pearls?"

"I am coming to that. You no doubt heard some

time ago of a robbery of jewelry and bank notes from a safe in Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's own house in Cavendish Square, though nothing about it appeared in the papers?"

"Yes, everybody seemed to know about that at the time."

"Everything stolen that night was covered by a special insurance. Now, the pearl necklace with the theft of which you were unjustly charged was also covered by a special insurance, and the policy was made out by the Company which insured Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's jewelry. Madame Marietta Stringborg, to whom the stolen pearl necklace found in your possession belonged, is a friend of Mrs. Robertson—they met first in Shanghai some years ago. These may have been coincidences, of course——"

As Yootha did not answer, Cora said:

"Do you mean to imply that there may have been——"

"I imply nothing," Stothert interrupted, "but——"

He pressed twice an electric button on the table, and almost at once a handsome young woman with a Semitic caste of countenance entered. It was Camille Lenoir.

"My partner," Stothert said, by way of introduction. "Camille," he looked up at her from where he sat, while she remained standing, "do you remember what Lord Froissart said to you the last time he came here—it was the morning of the

day on which he took his life—concerning recent heavy insurances effected in respect to diamonds with the insurance company of which he was a director?”

“Yes,” she replied, “he said he believed that some owners of valuable jewelry were insuring such jewelry and then planning bogus robberies, that is to say arranging for insured property to be ‘stolen’ by persons who eventually would return the property to the insurer after the insurance money had been paid.”

“Collusion, in short,” Cora said. “Mr. Stothert says he implies nothing regarding Mrs. Robertson, yet—yes, I follow you both.”

“No, come here, please.”

As he spoke, Stothert unlocked and pulled open a drawer in the roll-top desk at which he sat. From it he took a small sealed packet, broke the seals, unfolded it, and revealed a splendid pearl necklace.

“This is Madame Stringborg’s necklace,” he said. “The necklace found in your possession, Miss Hagerston, was made of imitation pearls.”

CHAPTER XVI.

GATHERING CLOUDS.

HENLEY week is said to be fine once in eight years, so presumably it was an eighth year, for the weather was perfect.

Captain Preston, an old blue, had made a point of attending the historic regatta ever since he had been at school; then had come a gap, due to the war, and then the regatta had been once more held.

To celebrate the event, also because he thought Yootha would like it, Preston had this year rented a houseboat which he kept moored near Maidenhead. Several times before they were engaged Yootha had spent a day with him on this boat, though he had not even then made up his mind to propose to her. But now the boat was moored at Henley, for the regatta week, and he had asked a few of his friends to come and lunch on board any day they felt inclined to. It was his intention then to announce his engagement, and to present them to his future wife.

None of his friends, however, put in an appearance. Some telegraphed their inability at the last moment to get out of town; others stayed away without sending an excuse.

Preston was surprised.

"Curious," he said thoughtfully, as he shook the

ashes out of his pipe about lunch time on the second day of the regatta. "I thought some of them would turn up to-day. Cooper and Atherton are down here, I know, because I saw them in a punt together half an hour ago."

Yootha, lying back near him in a deck chair, partly concealed by the overhead awning, did not reply.

"You seem silent to-day, my darling," he said after a pause. "Is anything the matter?"

He bent down as he stopped speaking, and peered under the awning.

The troubled look in her eyes disconcerted him.

"Darling, what is it?" he asked anxiously. "Is something worrying you?"

"Not worrying me, exactly," she answered, with rather a wan smile, "only——"

"Yes? Only what?"

"I think I can guess why your friends have stayed away. It isn't hard to guess."

"Isn't it? Well, I wish I knew the reason——ah——"

His expression had suddenly changed.

"So now you know," she went on. "Personally I am not surprised. You know how people have cold-shouldered me since that dreadful affair at the ball. Now it has become known we are engaged, people want less than ever to meet me. Had you been here alone, your friends would probably all have come to lunch."

"‘Friends,’ you call them?" Preston exclaimed

with a black look. "They are no longer friends of mine, I can assure you, if they are that sort."

"Oh, I don't blame them," Yootha answered with a hard smile. "One has to pay the penalty of notoriety, even though the notoriety may have come unsought. I dare say I shall live it down," and she gave a little shrug.

A tiny boat was sailing past, and the young man seated in the stern of it hailed Preston.

"Can I come aboard a moment?" he called out. "I want to speak to you."

"Come along," Preston answered, though without enthusiasm, for the young man was Archie La Planta. Half a minute later the little boat was alongside."

"I hope I am not intruding," La Planta said, discovering suddenly, or pretending to discover, that nobody else besides Yootha was aboard. "I heard you had a luncheon party. By the way," he added, "have I to congratulate you? I heard the news only to-day."

"Thanks," Preston said, concealing the annoyance the unlooked-for intrusion caused him. "Who told you we were engaged?"

"Oh, one or two people. That last race was a fine finish—what?"

"Very. Did you say there was something you wanted to ask me?"

"One or two things. The first is a message from Jessica. She wants to know if you and Miss Hagerston will come to tea on her houseboat—it's that

big boat, *The Apex*, disguised to look like a warship, with guns and all complete. They've a jolly party aboard and Jessica says she would love to see you both. I was instructed not on any account to let you say 'No,' " and he laughed.

Preston did not answer for a moment.

"What do you say, Yootha?" he said at last, with a significant look which she understood. "Shall we go, or shan't we?"

"I should like to go," she replied, taking her cue from his expression. "Have you had lunch, Mr. La Planta?"

"In point of fact I have not," he said carelessly, and lit a cigarette.

"Then you had better stay and lunch," Preston put in. "Others may drop in presently."

"Awfully good of you," La Planta said quietly. "The second thing I want to ask is whether you happen to have seen Madame Camille Lenoir of the Metropolitan Secret Agency anywhere about to-day. I know she is here, with friends, and I want particularly to catch her."

"I have not noticed her in any of the boats."

Archie La Planta made a little gesture of annoyance.

"How tiresome," he said. "Several people have caught sight of her to-day, but nobody can tell me where she is to be found. By the way, has the house with the bronze face found anything out as yet about the pearl necklace?"

"Nothing as yet, but they seem hopeful. They

think that in a week or so they may be able to tell me something."

"Good. Stothert is not an optimist, and would not have told you that unless he had good reason to."

He turned to Yootha.

"By the way, I have not seen you since the ball," he said. "And for that matter I didn't see you at the ball, because I couldn't identify you. That was a rotten experience you had—perfectly disgraceful to treat you as they did. I hear it made you quite ill, and I am not surprised. I hope that by now you have quite recovered?"

"Thank you," she answered, and in spite of her effort to speak naturally she could not prevent a certain coldness from betraying itself in her voice.

"Yes, I have recovered—though I don't think all my friends have!"

"Indeed? I think I don't follow you."

"Oh, it's of no consequence," she replied, flushing slightly; then she changed the subject.

Jessica was surprisingly genial and friendly when she greeted Yootha and Captain Preston on her houseboat a couple of hours later. Preston had availed himself of her invitation for a reason which he had not yet confided to Yootha, though, had he known it, the same reason had prompted Yootha to ask La Planta if he had lunched.

They knew that in spite of the olive branch now held out by Jessica, at heart Jessica's dislike of them both had become, if anything, intensified since

the affair at the ball, and that her hatred of Cora too had increased. Though not addicted to crediting gossip, so many little remarks of Jessica's concerning themselves had been repeated to them by different people that they could not turn an entirely deaf ear.

All sorts of well-known people were on Jessica's houseboat. Some Yootha had met, and to many of the remainder she and Preston were introduced. Indeed so friendly did everybody appear to be that presently she began to feel quite happy and at home—the reverse of what she and Preston had anticipated.

And of all aboard, none made himself more agreeable to Yootha and to Captain Preston than Archie La Planta. If anything, he rather overdid it, for he took the trouble to present several people whom they found extremely boring. They had been aboard perhaps half an hour, when Yootha suddenly heard her name spoken, and, turning, found herself face to face with a dark, very intelligent-looking man approaching middle age.

"Let me introduce Doctor Johnson," Stapleton said. "Johnson—Miss Hagerston."

The doctor looked at her keenly, smiling as he raised his hat.

"Our common friend, Captain Preston, has several times mentioned your name," he said. "Is he with you to-day?"

"Why, yes," Yootha answered. "He was here a minute ago. Have you only just come aboard?"

"No, I have been here the whole afternoon, but for the last hour I have been what I suppose is called 'tween decks,' settling the nation's affairs with some of my cronies whom I don't often have an opportunity of meeting," and he smiled. "Stapleton tells me, Miss Hagerston, that you and Preston are engaged. May I be allowed to offer my congratulations? I should like to congratulate you both very sincerely."

Yootha colored as she looked over his shoulder.

"Thank you so much," she said. "I feel as if we had met before; Charlie has told me so much about you."

"Well, though I have known him quite a short time, you will forgive my saying that I like him immensely. Yet, but for the unfortunate affair of that man's death the other night, I suppose I should not have had the pleasure of meeting him, or possibly you. Ah, here he comes."

For five minutes or more the three remained in conversation, though their talk was mostly commonplace. There were subjects all three would have liked to broach, but to have done so amid that *entourage* would have been impolitic.

"Yootha and I are dining *tête-à-tête* on my houseboat," Preston said after a while. "If you are not engaged, couldn't you join us—if you will take pot-luck? Do say you will, Johnson."

Johnson reflected for some moments.

"I should like to very much," he said at last. "It is most kind of you."

"Capital! Then that is arranged."

A diversion was created by the approach of a motor-launch with a party of masked entertainers, while the string quartette in the bows played a popular air. As it came near it slowed down, then stopped alongside.

"Oh, those people are splendid," Jessica exclaimed. "They were here yesterday and played for us during lunch. Louie," she turned to Stapleton, "make them give us an entertainment now."

The entertainment lasted a long time, so that Preston and Yootha were unable to leave the house-boat, as they had been about to do when the launch came in sight. When at last the entertainment ended they sought out their hostess.

"But surely you are not going?" Jessica exclaimed, holding Yootha's hand. "We are only just beginning to enjoy ourselves! Can't you both stay to dinner? We want to drink your health, you know," and she laughed in her deep and musical voice.

"So good of you," Yootha answered, though all the while her instinct told her that beneath this show of friendship and hospitality there lurked some sinister motive, "but we have a friend dining with us on our boat."

"Ah, in that case I suppose there is nothing further to be said," Jessica replied. "But I am very disappointed. Come to lunch to-morrow, will you? And you too, Captain Preston, make her bring you with her."

But Preston excused himself on the plea that he expected friends to lunch.

"Sometimes, though, friends don't turn up," Jessica said inconsequently. "If they don't, mind you come, both of you."

A few minutes after they had gone a man rowed up rapidly in a dinghy.

"Can I speak to Captain Preston, please?" he asked. "I am his servant. I have just come from his house-boat."

He had addressed La Planta, who, leaning against the rail, had been watching him approach.

"Is it anything important?" La Planta inquired, eyeing the man coldly.

"It is."

"Well, Captain Preston and Miss Hagerston have just left. You must have passed them."

"Have they gone back to the boat?"

"I expect so. They went down stream."

Borne along the water came the strains of a revue waltz played further down the river by the string quartette.

Preston's servant pulled the dinghy round, then started to row back.

And La Planta, blowing rings of cigarette smoke, watched him, with a look of amusement, growing smaller and smaller in the distance.

At last he straightened himself. Most of the guests had now left. Barely a dozen remained. Some one touched his elbow, and he turned.

"Well?" Stapleton said.

La Planta nodded.

"Quite satisfactory," he answered.

"And when will he receive it?"

La Planta glanced down at his wrist-watch.

"He may have got it already. I am glad that fellow missed him, though I can't think how he managed to. What fools people like Preston and that girl of his and Cora Hartsilver and the rest of them are to pit their wits against ours!"

"Preston is no fool, Archie. Nor, for that matter, is Cora."

But La Planta made no reply. Instead, he shrugged his shoulders, then tossed his cigarette into the water with a gesture of contempt.

CHAPTER XVII.

"NOBODY MUST KNOW!"

PRESTON'S servant, an ex-soldier who had served under him in France, returned to the houseboat, but neither Preston nor Yootha had arrived.

The man looked about him, puzzled. Then, concluding that his master must have been detained by friends on his way back, he began to attend to his work.

But when an hour had passed, and still Preston did not return, he went outside and scanned the river with his masters' field-glasses. It was past seven, and he had dinner nearly ready. It would be annoying if his master stayed away for dinner without giving him warning.

Presently a boat stopped alongside, and its sole occupant got out and came aboard.

"Captain Preston about?" he inquired breezily. "I am dining with him."

"Dining with him, sir?"

"Yes. Hasn't he told you?"

"He has not been here since four o'clock, sir. He and Miss Hagerston went out to tea and have not been back since. I have an important letter for him and wish he would return."

It was now Johnson's turn to look puzzled.

"I met him and Miss Hagerston at tea," he said

at last, "and they invited me to come and dine. I can't understand it. Anyhow, I had better wait."

"If you would, sir. As he has invited you to dine he is bound to be back soon."

Johnson looked again at the man.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"Yes, sir, at Fig Tree Court."

"Of course. I remember."

He lay back in the deck-chair which he had taken, lit a cigarette, and began carelessly to focus the boats on the river through Preston's binocular.

At eight o'clock the man came back.

"Hadn't I better serve your dinner, sir?" he inquired tentatively. "I am sure the captain would not like you to be kept waiting. Something important must have detained him, sir, for he is always punctual to the moment, and of course there being no telephone——"

"Thank you, but I will wait a little longer. If he is not back by half-past eight perhaps I will have something to eat, as I can't get anything anywhere else now."

"Thank you, sir," and the man retired with noiseless tread.

But at half-past eight neither Preston nor Yootha had returned, nor had they by half-past nine. Johnson had waited until nine, then had eaten a light meal and gone away.

The ex-soldier was becoming anxious.

He pulled out of his pocket the long envelope addressed to his master, which had been brought

by a man in flannels who had appeared to him a gentleman and had assured him the letter was most urgent and must be delivered at the earliest possible moment.

"I wonder if this would throw some light on it?" he said aloud, as he eyed the envelope suspiciously. "So help me, I'd like to know."

It was a gorgeous night, without a breath of air, and as warm as in the tropics. As the man stood on the deck of the house-boat smoking a cigar and with his hands in his pockets, his thoughts traveled back to the many hardships he and his master had endured together in France during the three years he had served under him; of the tight corners they had more than once found themselves in; and of his master's extraordinary coolness in moments of extreme crisis.

"Ah, if they was all like him," he said reflectively, "we should have an army, and no mistake!"

For, like many another British Tommy who had been face to face with death alongside his officers, the fellow worshiped Preston. In such high esteem did he hold him, indeed, that sometimes his friends would grow weary of hearing "Captain Preston's" many virtues extolled by the faithful servant, and curtly bid him "shut up."

It was nearly eleven when the man, half-dozing in a deck-chair, heard his named called. Instantly he sprang up.

"Yes, sir? That you, sir? Nothing the matter, I hope, sir?"

In the moonlight Preston and Yootha Hagerston could be seen standing together on the bank.

"Are you alone, Tom?" Preston asked. His voice had a curious timbre.

"Yes, sir. Doctor Johnson came to dinner, sir, but as you had not returned by nine o'clock I gave him dinner alone, sir."

"You did quite right."

After speaking a few words under his breath to Yootha, Preston came aboard alone, leaving her standing on the bank.

"Tom," he said in a low tone; "Miss Hagerston is in rather an embarrassing position. Things have happened which have prevented her returning to town with Mrs. Hartsilver, who was to have met her after leaving her friends, and there isn't a bed to be had anywhere, and of course the last train to London has gone. There is nothing for it but for Miss Hagerston to sleep here, but nobody must know about it, you understand. Now, what can we arrange?"

Tom rubbed his chin. Then suddenly he looked up.

"I can sleep on deck, sir, in a deck-chair; very nice on a night like this. Then if you would sleep in my quarters, Miss Hagerston could have your quarters and be completely cut off, sir."

Preston reflected.

"That seems the only solution," he said at last. "But, as I say—nobody must know."

"Nobody shall know, sir."

"Right."

He turned, and called to Yootha to come aboard. Then he told her of the arrangement.

She was pale, and looked greatly worried. There were dark marks under her eyes, and a casual acquaintance who had met her in the afternoon would hardly have believed her now to be the same woman. She was silent and *distracte*.

"To-night's adventure seems like a horrid nightmare," she exclaimed a little later, suddenly gripping Preston's arm. "What is it makes people so horrible, Charlie? All to-day we were so happy, and now——"

She stopped abruptly, and a sob choked her. Preston put his arms about her, kissing her at first gently, then passionately, on the lips.

"My little girl mustn't fret," he murmured. "I know it is all dreadful, but it will pass. We think now there is no way of escape, because we can see none, but we shall find a way. My darling must leave everything to me and place implicit confidence in me."

But though he spoke thus his heart was heavy. And on the top of it all here was Yootha alone with him in his house-boat for the night. True, nobody need know, but the risk of discovery existed, and so long as it existed there was danger, especially in view of his and Yootha's experience during the past few hours. Blackmailers he had for years looked upon with loathing, and always he had told himself that should he by any extraordinary mishap ever

render himself open to blackmail he would then and there face the music, attack his attacker, thrash him if need be, do anything and everything sooner than accede to any scoundrel's proposals.

And yet here he was hemmed in with Yootha and on the point of becoming an unwilling accessory to another's blackmail in order to shield, not himself only—that, he told himself, he never would have done—but the woman he loved to distraction, and to protect her honor. The prospect was too awful, and, as he thought about it now, racking his brain to find a way out of the net which had been so cleverly drawn around them both, every way seemed blocked, and a cold perspiration broke out all over him.

Silently he kissed Yootha once more as she bade him good night, and for several minutes they remained locked in each other's arms.

When he was alone again, Tom came to him. In his hand was a large, rather bulky gray envelope.

"This was brought for you, sir, about six o'clock, and as it is marked very urgent I took the dinghy and rowed to the boat where you had gone to tea, but the gentleman told me you had just left."

"What gentleman?"

"I don't know his name, sir, but——"

And he described his appearance.

"La Planta," Preston said aloud, with a frown. Then he took the letter and went below to read it by the light of the lamp, leaving Tom on deck.

About two minutes later the ex-soldier stopped abruptly in his work of folding up the deck-chairs, and listened. No sound was audible.

"Strange," he murmured. "I could have sworn I heard a groan."

Stepping very quietly, he crept down the few steps, then peered into his master's cabin, the door of which stood half open.

Preston, seated with his elbows on the table, his head resting between his hands, was staring at some letters spread out in front of him. Thus he remained for several moments, motionless, though from where Tom stood his heavy breathing was audible.

Tom gave a light knock on the door, then entered.

Preston gave no sign.

"Is there anything more I can do for you, sir, before I go to bed?" the man asked.

Preston did not reply. He still made no sign, and seemed unconscious of the other's presence.

Tom was about to repeat the inquiry, when all at once Preston collapsed in a heap, his head falling forward heavily on to the table.

Instantly his servant sprang to his assistance. Thinking he must have fainted, though never before had he known him to faint, the man loosened his collar, then ran quickly away and returned with water with which he began to bathe his master's temples and the back of his neck. Thus he continued for some minutes, at the end of which time Preston began slowly to recover consciousness. Soon

he looked into Tom's face, then gripped his hand tightly.

"Tom," he exclaimed in a hoarse whisper. "I have had bad news, very bad news. I may be in great difficulties soon, and you are about the only man who will then be able to help me. I can trust you implicitly, eh, Tom?"

He gave the man a searching look, with an expression in his eyes which Tom had never seen there before. Though only his servant, Tom had come to be looked upon by Preston, who had so often faced death with him, as a personal friend.

"I think so, sir," he answered grimly. "Do you feel a little better now, sir?"

"Yes, I'm all right. Tell me who handed you the letter you gave me just now?"

Tom described the appearance of the man in flannels.

"Did he say anything?"

"No, sir. Only asked me to be sure to give it to you the moment you returned, as it was very urgent. I was to give it to you myself, sir."

He turned, opened a little cupboard in the corner, and took out a tantalus and a siphon.

"You had better drink this, sir," and he handed his master a stiff brandy and soda.

"Thank you, Tom."

When he had emptied the tumbler, Preston looked better.

"Miss Hagerston must know nothing about my being taken ill," he said.

"She shall not, sir."

"Or that I received a letter brought by hand."

"She shall not, sir."

"Tom, is my little automatic anywhere about?"

The man glanced at him suspiciously. A thought had flashed into his mind, but the next moment he had dismissed it, and replied:

"Yes, sir, I have it."

"Keep it loaded, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And now you can go to bed, Tom. I hope you will manage to sleep on that chair."

"We have both of us slept in worse places than that, sir," and he smiled grimly at the recollection.

"Will you be all right now, sir?"

"Quite all right. I think the heat upset me. Good night, Tom."

"Good night, sir."

"The heat!" Tom murmured as he rolled himself up in his blanket in the deck-chair. "*I don't* think!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT DOCTOR JOHNSON KNEW.

THERE had been several rather startling suicides during the season which was now ending, of men and women of social standing, and in every case the usual verdict had been returned. The events had created a certain amount of interest; theories to account for the tragedies had been advanced; then the nine days' wonder had subsided and London life had gone on again as usual.

When, however, no less than seven men and five women of high rank and apparently without a care in the world had ended their lives within the first three weeks of July, the newspapers had begun to agitate to know the reason of this epidemic of suicides which exceeded even the epidemic of 1918, when Lord Hope-Cooper, Viscount Molesley, the Honorable Vera Froissart, Madame Leonora Vandervelt, Sir Stephen Lethbridge, Henry Hartsilver, and others, had died by their own hand.

In Society, too, everybody had begun to talk. The mystery of Lord Froissart's suicide comparatively recently, when his body had been found at the foot of the cliffs at Bournemouth, had never been solved. Now the hot weather was held by some to be responsible for the series of tragedies, but this theory was not general. Interviewed on

the subject of the "epidemic" several eminent psychologists and scientists expounded their views in more or less complex language, the meaning of which most people failed to grasp.

Indeed, the majority of those interviewed endeavored to convince the public that the series of tragedies was due to whatever cause they themselves happened to be interested in. Thus the spiritualists had theories concerning "souls" and "vampires" and the vengeance of people long dead; ecclesiastics were perfectly certain the prevalence of suicide was due to men's, and especially to women's, sinful way of living; followers of certain unconventional physicians' views on eugenics attributed the outbreak to the effects of "unwholesome environment," though in what way the dead people's environment had been unwholesome they did not explain; while advocates of early Victorianism were ready to "prove" that the tragedies would have been unthinkable in their young days.

All such speculation of course led nowhere, and served only to increase anxiety as well as alarm. The theory which enlisted most adherents was that folk lavishly endowed with this world's goods were in the habit of exercising so little self-control that eventually their minds became affected, and finally unbalanced. This was, to some extent, the view held by Doctor Johnson, and he told Blenkiron as much when, happening to meet him one day at his club, their conversation drifted to the prevalent topic.

"I am anxious about our common friend, Charlie Preston," Blenkiron said presently. "Have you seen him lately?"

"Not since Henley week," Johnson replied. "What is the matter with him?"

"I am certain he has something on his mind; he appears to me to have changed enormously within the last week or so."

"In what way?"

"All the 'vim' seems to have gone out of him. He seems to be always preoccupied, always thinking—thinking. Often when I speak to him he doesn't answer; in fact I don't believe he hears. He used not to be like that."

"He is engaged to be married."

"I know, but I am positive that isn't the reason. If it is, heaven prevent my ever becoming engaged!" and Blenkiron smiled rather grimly.

"Then to what do you attribute it?"

"I don't attribute it. There is nothing to which I can attribute it. But I tell you this in confidence, Johnson—if I heard that Charlie Preston had become another victim to the suicide epidemic I should not be surprised."

"You don't say so! He is one of the last men I should have thought capable of that. When could I see him, I wonder? I should like to have a talk with him, after what you say."

"Why not ask him to lunch one day? Oddly enough, Johnson, Miss Hagerston, whom he is to marry, has greatly changed too. This is not imagination on my part, I can assure you."

But before Johnson could invite Preston to lunch, something happened.

This was a visit which Johnson received from Cora Hartsilver; she had become acquainted with him about the time when Yootha was in trouble regarding the pearl necklace.

Cora had made an appointment by telephone, and during the afternoon she called.

"I have come to see you," she said, "about my friend, Miss Hagerston, who tells me she had the pleasure of meeting you at Henley."

"Yes, and I had the pleasure of congratulating her upon her engagement. She is not indisposed, I hope?"

"Indeed she is, seriously indisposed, though not in the way you mean. She is mentally indisposed, if I may put it so."

"I am sorry to hear that. Can you give me a few particulars?"

"Well, she is staying with me at present, and has been since Henley week. She asked me if she might come to stay with me because she could no longer sleep at night in her flat—she got frightened and had terrible nightmares, she said. That she has something on her mind I am absolutely convinced; yet though we are such intimate friends she positively refuses to tell me anything, though she as good as admits that she is worried. So I thought I would take the liberty of asking your advice without telling her."

"Hadn't I better see her?"

"I think not, at least not yet. Your calling to

see her would arouse her suspicion, because I have asked her once or twice to let me ask a doctor to call, and each time she has strongly opposed the suggestion."

"Is she unhappy at the thought of her approaching marriage?"

"Indeed no! She is terribly in love. In fact, I tremble to think what would happen to her if any mishap befell Captain Preston. So strongly do I feel on that point that sometimes I wonder if she has some secret cause to believe that some mishap may befall him. He seems greatly worried too."

"So I understand."

"Why, who told you?"

"His great friend, Blenkiron."

"Well, Doctor Johnson, what do you suggest?"

For a minute the doctor did not answer.

"You say the change in Miss Hagerston dates from Henley Regatta?" he said at last.

"From the morning of the third day. She went to the Regatta on the second day only. She went with Captain Preston."

"That was the day I met them both on Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's house-boat. They were then both in the best of spirits, apparently, and looked radiantly happy."

Again he pondered, his brow slightly contracted.

"Where did Miss Hagerston sleep that night?" he asked suddenly.

This was a question Cora had not expected. She colored violently. Then she said awkwardly:

"Oh, at her flat in Knightsbridge, I suppose."

"You don't know for certain?"

"No. How should I?"

"You say that you and Miss Hagerston are great friends, Mrs. Hartsilver, so I thought that probably you would know. She did not, I suppose, spend the night on Preston's house-boat?"

"How could she, Doctor Johnson, alone with him!"

The doctor looked at her keenly, but she would not meet his gaze.

"Why not be frank with me, Mrs. Hartsilver," he said, lowering his voice. "She did spend the night on the boat with him, and you know it."

Cora looked terribly alarmed.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, doctor," she exclaimed, "don't let anybody know! Think what would be said, the inference that would be drawn, especially as they are engaged. I will be frank with you, then. I was with friends at Henley, and Yootha was to have met me at ten o'clock at night, and we were to have returned to town together. But she did not meet me, and I, thinking she must have gone back to London alone, returned with my friends. As soon as I got home I rang up her flat, and her maid said she had not come in; the maid was sitting up, awaiting her. I was dreadfully upset, and blamed myself for having missed her.

"Next morning, about noon, she came to my house, looking very ill and worried. She said that she and Captain Preston had forgotten all about

the time until it was too late to meet me, also by then the last train had gone. Captain Preston tried everywhere to find a bed for her, but there was not one to be had. Finally there was nothing for it but for her to return with the captain to his house-boat, where he gave her his bed and slept himself in his servant's bed, while his servant slept outside in a deck-chair. That is what she told me, and I believe every word, because she couldn't lie to me. There was no harm in it at all, believe me, there was not, but of course it would not do for people to know. Nobody knows but you and Captain Preston's servant, a man absolutely to be trusted not to talk."

"And Miss Hagerston's maid. At least she knows that her mistress did not come home."

Johnson began to pace the room.

"Of course I shall treat what you have just told me as strictly confidential," he said, "but the fact remains that we don't know what happened during the time Preston and Miss Hagerston left Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's house-boat, and the time, late at night, when they returned to his own house-boat."

"What do you imply?" Cora asked sharply, drawing herself up.

"Forgive me if I have conveyed a wrong impression," Johnson said, stopping in his walk. "I assure you I did not mean to imply what you think. Nothing was further from my mind. No, my thoughts were traveling in quite a different channel. Tell me, Mrs. Hartsilver, are Miss Hagerston and

Captain Preston now on terms of intimacy with Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson? They appeared to be the other day, and I was surprised, because I was under the impression that their acquaintanceship with her had for some time past been, how shall I put it—rather strained?”

“Indeed it was more than rather strained,” Cora answered quickly. “Mrs. Robertson detests Yootha almost as much as she detests me, and I think I am safe in saying that she bears Captain Preston no love at all. As we are speaking in confidence I may as well tell you that Miss Hagerston, Captain Preston, myself, and one or two others have for some months past suspected Jessica Mervyn-Robertson and her friends, Mr. Aloysius Stapleton and Mr. Archie La Planta, of being impostors of some sort, if nothing worse; we have reasons for suspecting this. Consequently we have been making private inquiries about them of the Metropolitan Secret Agency and other sources, and this, I think, they have got to know. Captain Preston and Yootha accepted their invitation to tea on their house-boat chiefly out of curiosity, I believe, and were greatly surprised at the exceptionally friendly reception accorded them. I think they made a mistake in associating with Mrs. Robertson at all in the circumstances.”

Johnson smiled.

“As that is so, Mrs. Hartsilver, perhaps you will admit me to your little group which suspects ‘Mrs. Jessica’ and her two satellites of not being all

that they seem to be. Tell me, wasn't Captain Preston in Shanghai at one time?"

"Yes, I have heard him say so."

"Well, from the middle of 1910 to the end of 1912 I practiced in Hong Kong. Englishmen, as I dare say you know, become very clannish when exiled in places of that sort. I used to visit Shanghai rather frequently, where I had a *locum tenens*, and if Mrs. Jessica and a notorious young woman named Angela Robertson are not the same—oh, but they are the same, I am perfectly positive they are. Stapleton, too, lived in Shanghai for a while—that must have been in 1911. He made the Astor Hotel his home, remember, and though I only saw him once or twice, and never met him to speak to, my *locum tenens* had all sorts of extraordinary stories about him, and my *locum* was not a man to heed idle gossip.

Stapleton and Fobart Robertson—the adventurer whom Mrs. Jessica married—were hand in glove at that time. Then one day Fobart Robertson found Shanghai too hot to hold him—and if you had ever been in Shanghai, Mrs. Hartsilver, you would know how hot that must have been—and left hurriedly, whereupon Stapleton calmly stepped into his shoes and became to all intents Mr. Robertson—at the club they nicknamed him 'Fobart's understudy.' It created something of a scandal amongst the British population, but in the East the morals of most Europeans are on a lower plane than over here, and after a while the *liaison* came to be winked at,

so that Angela Robertson was once more received as she had been when living with her husband, and Stapleton, being well-to-do and extremely hospitable, and consequently popular, was no longer cold-shouldered. Other friends of Angela Robertson's in Shanghai were, I remember, Mrs. Stringborg—yes, the woman whose necklace was removed—and a queer fellow called Timothy Macmahon. It was Macmahon's widow to whom Lord Froissart left all his property, if you remember. Does all this interest you, Mrs. Hartsilver, or am I boring you?"

"Boring me!" Cora exclaimed. "I am thrilled! Captain Preston knows nothing of all this, I suppose?"

"Not so far as I am aware. Of course it would not do for me to say outside what I have just told you in confidence. Having no evidence in support of my statements I might get myself into serious trouble, to say nothing of ruining my practice."

"Oh, but you will tell Captain Preston?"

"I would sooner you told him, Mrs. Hartsilver."

Cora smiled.

"So that if either of us should get into trouble it would not be you?"

"Precisely," Johnson replied with a laugh. He was silent for some moments.

"And now you may think what I am about to say is strange, Mrs. Hartsilver, but I have rather keen intuition, and something seems to tell me that whatever happened to Preston and Miss Hagerston that evening at Henley, which apparently upset

them, Angela Robertson and Stapleton had a hand in it. The idea may sound ridiculous, but that is my strong impression."

"But what can have happened to them, doctor?"

"I have no idea—at present. Can't you induce Miss Hagerston to tell you? You and she are such friends."

"I am afraid not, but I will try."

"Supposing, for instance, that in the ardor of their love for each other they should have been discovered in some apparently compromising, though in reality quite harmless situation—and been blackmailed. Such things happen oftener than you might suppose; not that I suppose you ever think about such things."

Cora glanced at him with an expression of horror.

"Is that really so?" she asked.

Johnson nodded.

"Almost any man or woman, not excepting the most virtuous, may under certain circumstances get let in for blackmail, and the wonder to me is that more are not blackmailed. Look at this so-called 'epidemic' of suicide that everybody is talking about and that the papers are full of. My private opinion is that some, at any rate, are victims of blackmail, who have taken their lives to escape public exposure."

"But blackmailed by whom?"

"Ah, there you have me. The whole thing reads to me as though the victims, if blackmailed, were charged by the same person, or it may have been by members of some gang, or an organization of

some sort. Don't you remember the series of suicides which took place a year ago and that—oh, I beg your pardon, Mrs. Hartsilver. I had quite forgotten."

"Pray don't apologize, Doctor Johnson. I am most interested in what you say. I wonder—I wonder if poor Henry——"

"I knew your husband slightly, Mrs. Hartsilver, and I must say I was amazed when I read of the tragedy. The last man—the very last man——"

"So everybody said. Blackmail! Now I wonder if——"

Unconsciously she stopped, for strange thoughts, reflections, memories of little incidents, were crowding in upon her. Then quickly her train of thought shot away into a different channel. The man she had loved so dearly, young Sir Stephen Lethbridge—the whole of the terrible affair came back to her, as though it had happened the day before.

"Exactly the way Molesley made away with himself," again she heard her husband's voice, unemotional, cold as ice. And in Viscount Molesley's room a quantity of burnt papers, she remembered reading, had been found in the grate and scattered beside the body.

CHAPTER XIX.

WITHOUT A STAIN.

ALIX STOTHERT, the mysterious manager of the Metropolitan Secret Agency, lived in the house with the bronze face, on the top floor, and so did his partner, the woman known as Madame Camille Lenoir.

They were a sinister couple, of whom nobody seemed to know anything, and the police, when questioned concerning them, as they had been on more than one occasion, refused to make any statement. That the police looked upon them with no favorable eye was generally admitted by those in a position to know, and the inference naturally drawn was that Scotland Yard was jealous of the Metropolitan Secret Agency's extraordinary success in making discoveries which led to the arrest of criminals while the police failed to obtain even clues.

They lived a strange life, apparently, for the door leading into the suite of rooms which they occupied was always kept locked—it had two Yale locks—and no servants or other helpers were ever admitted.

The sitting-room, "living-room" would have been a better name for it, had three telephones, and a metaphone which connected with their office on the first floor. It had also a tape-machine, and in

Stothert's bedroom was a speaking tube which went down to the back entrance of the house and was so arranged that Stothert could be spoken to from a blind alley off the narrow little street. On to this blind alley the door opened.

Stothert and Camille Lenoir were alone in their living room about ten o'clock one night during the first week of August, when the speaking tube whistled shrilly in the room adjoining. At once the man got up and went into the bedroom to find out who wanted him. For only a few seconds he listened. Then he spoke one word, pushed the whistle in again, and rejoined his partner.

"They are hot on the trail of Jessica," he said calmly, as he seated himself again, and readjusted the eye-shade which he had taken off when he went into the next room. "I believe in the end they will prove her undoing, and Stapleton's."

"Shall you warn her?" the woman asked anxiously.

"Certainly not. It is no concern of ours."

"How do you mean—no concern of ours?"

"In the circumstances. Had she treated us differently——"

"I understand. And whom has she mostly to fear?"

"Preston. He is so clever, and has such foresight and imagination, that Stapleton and La Planta may find themselves presently on the horns of a dilemma of their own creating."

After a minute's pause, during which he seemed to be thinking deeply, he unhooked the receiver

from the transmitter on the table at his elbow, and waited with it pressed to his ear, without asking for any number.

"Please come here at once," he said suddenly, speaking into the transmitter.

"Yes, most important."

"Yes, without any delay."

Then he replaced the receiver, relit his pipe, which had gone out, picked up a newspaper and began carelessly to scan its headlines.

"I see Preston's wedding is to take place shortly," he said presently.

"Perhaps," his companion observed significantly.

"Hulloa!" Stothert exclaimed suddenly, "have you seen this, Camille? Levi Schomberg's body is to be exhumed."

The woman sprang up from her chair, and leant over Stothert's shoulder to read the startling announcement. It was contained in two lines in the stop press. No reason for the exhumation was given or hinted at.

"Alix, that will discomfort our friend," she said with a grin. "And Jessica and Stapleton too. I wonder who brought that about."

"That Doctor Johnson, you may depend. He was much upset, as I told you, at his opinion at the inquest being turned down by the coroner. This may have an interesting sequel, not calculated to set Jessica's mind at rest."

"And may strengthen Preston's hand. I believe that, all along, he and Blenkiron have suspected La Planta."

They went on talking about the exhumation and what it might eventually lead to, until the whistle of the speaking tube interrupted them once more. After answering it Stothert pressed a button in the wall, and waited. A minute later the door of the room opened and a woman entered.

Young and very pretty, she was dressed apparently for a ball or a reception. She shut the door after her, then without ceremony went over and sat down in a big arm-chair near the two occupants of the room, neither of whom had risen or greeted her when she entered.

"What do you want?" she asked curtly, addressing Stothert.

"We want you to find out as soon as possible, to-night if you can, where Mrs. Timothy Macmahon is now, the woman to whom Lord Froissart left his fortune which should have been inherited by his elder daughter, Mrs. Ferdinand Westrup. When last we heard of Mrs. Macmahon she still resided in Cashel, County Tipperary. Where are you going to-night?"

"To a reception in Berkeley Square," and she mentioned the name of her hostess. "You have put me to great inconvenience by making me come here at this hour."

Stothert shrugged his shoulders.

"We are all put to inconvenience at times," he said. "You surely did not expect me to make an exception in your case? People of higher social standing than you have been put to inconvenience on our account."

"Shall I ring you up if I discover the woman's whereabouts?" his visitor inquired, changing the subject.

"If you please. Also you will notice if any people of interest to us attend the reception. And take this." He handed her a sealed envelope. "Its contents you can read when you have left here.

For fully five minutes after the pretty visitor had gone, Stothert sat in silence, sucking thoughtfully at his pipe. His companion, apparently still thinking about the announcement in the newspaper, made no attempt to interrupt him. Suddenly he turned to her and removed his pipe from his mouth.

"Froissart's death was most unfortunate," he said, "most unfortunate. I particularly wanted him to attend the Albert Hall ball, and he was going to on our advice, if you remember."

"Not more unfortunate than Sir Stephen Lethbridge's death," Camille Lenoir answered, "or, for that matter, Leonora Vandervelt's. We have to face these setbacks. Still, nobody up to the present suspects our methods."

"Up to the present—no. But don't be too confident. The police would ask nothing better than to be able to find out all about us, and how we work, and then let us down in order to get back on us. If the true verdict had been brought in regarding Vera Froissart's death, and the cause of her suicide, it would have been a bad day for us. I shall not be sorry when we cut adrift from this business. There are times when the excitement of

carrying on becomes too tense for a man of my age."

His companion smiled.

"How you keep on about your age," she said. "You may be getting on physically, but how many men of your age possess your clear brain and your clear intelligence? I don't look forward to the Schomberg inquiry, I can assure you. What can they suspect? And who can have applied for the exhumation? Not his relatives, I am sure. They were too anxious to inherit his estate to be likely to want inquiries to be made. And I am not of your opinion that Johnson and Blenkiron made the application."

Nobody, listening to Camille then, would have believed her to be the common French woman familiar to clients of the Metropolitan Secret Agency. For now, closeted with her partner in their private sitting-room, she spoke excellent English, while her foreign accent was barely perceptible.

The telephone bell rang, and Camille answered it. Then she pressed her palm on the transmitter.

"Preston," she said laconically. "He wants to speak to you at once."

Stothert took the instrument.

"That you, Captain Preston?" he asked.

"No, I can't see you to-night."

"Yes. Almost any time to-morrow would suit me."

"I am sorry. I have no further news as yet, but I hope to have some soon."

"Oh, yes, we are getting on famously, and on the right line, I feel sure. By the way, I take it the announcement of your approaching marriage in to-day's papers is official?"

"It is. Then I congratulate you. Good night, Captain Preston."

"He has not read the announcement about the exhumation, apparently, and it was no affair of mine to tell him," Stothert remarked, when he had rung off. "We must tell him something soon about Jessica, if only to keep him quiet. By the way, Stapleton told me recently that Levi Schomberg had hinted to him more than once that Mrs. Hartsilver was a designing woman. What can Schomberg's reason have been for saying what we know to be manifestly untrue?"

"Probably the same reason which prompted him to make other false statements," Camille replied. "We may learn that, and other curious things concerning Levi at the inquiry."

The news that apparently some mystery surrounded Levi Schomberg's death aroused considerable comment. Though rarely seen in public places, he had been well known to a comparatively large circle of London Society, and had borne, rightly or wrongly, the reputation of being the most "accommodating" man of his calling in London.

This reputation had been due possibly to the fact that his knowledge of the class for which he catered had been exceedingly deep, also that he happened to be an excellent judge of character and of human

nature. Thus where he would politely refuse to accommodate A, B and C, with a loan, no matter how small, to D, E and F, though in no better circumstances and with no better security to offer, he would readily advance quite large sums, instinctively knowing them to be people who would eventually repay the loans of their own accord, also the heavy interest which he charged, even though before doing so they might need to renew their bills perhaps several times.

"Odd thing, this exhumation of Schomberg's body," Blenkiron remarked carelessly as he stood chatting with La Planta at the corner of Brook Street one morning. "What do you make of it, Archie?"

"Don't ask me," La Planta replied quickly. "I only hope I shall not be dragged in to give evidence. I begin to wish to heaven I had not met Schomberg that night, but Louie would invite him."

"I wish you had been present at the inquest," Blenkiron went on. "Your documentary evidence left several points undecided, as the coroner clearly explained. I believe if those points had been cleared up this exhumation business would never have come about."

"Yes. I now wish, too, that I had been there, though I congratulated myself at the time on being out of it all. The doctor, you see, wouldn't let me out of bed—I had such a bad chill. What is your theory concerning the cause of death?"

"Oh, I have no theory," Blenkiron answered. "The coroner attributed death to natural causes, so I stand by his decision."

"That is exactly my argument," La Planta said hurriedly. "Yet I meet fellows who declare they thought all along there was something 'fishy,' as they call it, about the poor fellow's death, though you may depend on it the 'fishiness' would never have occurred to them if this exhumation had not been ordered. The police, I hear, were notified privately that there were certain doubts as to the cause of death."

Yet when the inquiry did take place, the report was not wholly satisfactory. Though no traces of any sort of poison could be found, the condition of the remains was declared to be abnormal.

There is no need to go into details. The next startling announcement was that Archie La Planta had been arrested.

At once the newspapers focused the attention of the public on the unhappy young man, and then for the first time the searchlight of notoriety illuminated as much of his past life as the press was able to rake up. Indeed, it came as rather a shock to some of his friends to find that apparently nothing was known about him prior to his arrival in London some years previously.

Questioned on this point during his cross-examination, La Planta admitted having spent some years of his life in the East, also that he had known Stapleton in China. The question put as a trap: "Did

you ever borrow money from deceased?" he emphatically negatived.

"Now can you," asked the cross-examiner a little later, "account for the fact that some drops of a very rare perfume, the name and nature of which I need not for the moment specify, were found on the left sleeve of the fancy tunic you wore at the Albert Hall ball, and that some of the same perfume was discovered on the fancy dress suit worn by deceased that night?"

"Certainly," La Planta answered without an instant's hesitation. "I had a little phial of the perfume with me at the ball, and as Mr. Schomberg told me he liked the scent very much I gave him a little. In fact I sprayed it on his clothes myself."

"And where did you obtain the perfume? I understand it is not to be had in London."

"Quite true. I have to get it from abroad."

"'Abroad,' is a big place, Mr. La Planta," the examining counsel observed dryly. "May I ask you to be more definite in your statement? Perhaps you will tell me from what town or place 'abroad' it is, or was, sent to you?"

"Shanghai."

"Shanghai! Indeed! This is most interesting. And who sends it to you from Shanghai? May I have his—or her—name and address?"

At once La Planta scribbled on a scrap of paper which he then handed to counsel for the prosecution.

When the latter had conferred in undertones with his solicitor, he continued:

"Are you aware, Mr. La Planta, that this perfume may not be legally sold or bought in this country without a special license, also that to import it is illegal, owing to its being, in addition to a perfume, an extremely potent drug possessing peculiar properties?"

"I am aware of that."

"And yet you deliberately imported it?"

"I did."

To all present in Court it was obvious examining counsel was becoming annoyed at La Planta's frank and unhesitating replies to questions meant to disconcert him. For nearly two hours the examination continued, and when at last it ended the witness left the Court "without a stain upon his character" so far as the Jew's death was concerned.

CHAPTER XX.

CONCERNS A RUMOR.

PRESTON had impatiently awaited the result of La Planta's cross-examination, and the verdict disappointed him. For secretly he felt convinced still that even if the young man had not directly connived at the money-lender's death, yet that he could throw light on the cause of death if he wished to.

"I cannot help thinking," he said to Yootha while they were discussing the mystery on the day after La Planta's acquittal, "that he knows something too concerning what happened at Henley regatta. I have felt that all along. And had he been found guilty of conniving at Schomberg's death we might have been in a position to escape from what now threatens us. However, I believe that in the end we shall be able to snap our fingers at the people who are trying to blackmail us, so you must try to cheer up, my darling."

They were sitting out on the heather under the shadow of the Sugarloaf Mountain in Monmouthshire, where they had been staying for a fortnight at the Angel Hotel in Abergavenny, and, but for the development which threatened they would have been completely happy. As it was, when they succeeded in forgetting what the future might hold for them, the hours were the happiest they had ever

spent. It was now August, but Monmouthshire is one of the few counties which holiday makers seem consistently to overlook in spite of its lovely scenery, with the result that the picturesque moors were almost deserted.

For some minutes they remained silent. The quietude of the countryside, the almost oppressive heat, the wonderful landscape which unfolded itself before them, stretching away to the silvery river Usk visible some miles down the valley, seemed in harmony with their mood. And then presently, gently placing his arm about her, Preston drew Yootha closer to him and pressed his lips to hers.

"My darling," he murmured, "whatever happens, believe me I shall love you always—always. Doesn't it seem strange that for all these years we should not have met, and that then we should have become acquainted by the merest chance? Supposing I had not happened to wander into Bond Street that morning, just a year ago—it was the ninth of August, the date of the opening of our great offensive on the Western front—and that I had not been with George, who knew La Planta, and that La Planta had not invited us to lunch with him at the Ritz we should probably be strangers still! I believe I fell in love with you that day, Yootha; certainly you attracted me in the most extraordinary way directly we were introduced—you and your delightful friend, Cora."

"And yet during the whole lunch you spoke hardly a word, and Jessica thought you dull and stupid,

I remember," she exclaimed, laughing. "I know, because I heard her say so to Aloysius Stapleton."

"I dare say I was dull and stupid. I certainly felt dull, but several months of hospital life are not calculated to sharpen one's intelligence, are they? As for Jessica, from the moment I set eyes on her something in her personality repelled me, though afterwards, at her house, when we had that lovely music, I felt for the first time less antagonistic. But if I knew her twenty years I should never get to like her, or, indeed, trust her. Doesn't she affect you in that way?"

"Not in that way, precisely, though I have never liked her, as you know. I have somehow felt all the time that she and Stapleton and La Planta were playing some deep game, and I believe they are playing it still, whatever it may be. How odd she should have invited us to tea on her house-boat that day at Henley, and been so amiable, and yet that so soon afterwards——"

She checked herself abruptly, and nestled closer to her lover. The pressure of his strong arm seemed to give her confidence, restore her courage. After all, she reflected, so long as they were together, what could anything matter? And then, carried away suddenly by her emotion, she flung her arms about his neck and kissed him again and again.

The sun was setting when at last they rose and prepared to go back to the village, a couple of miles distant, where they had left their car.

"Why," Preston said, suddenly producing a letter

from his pocket, "I forgot to tell you, dear, I received this from George just before we came out. He is staying in town during August, as I think I told you, and he says he has been again to the house with the bronze face. While there he was informed that Mrs. Timothy Macmahon, to whom Lord Froissart left his fortune, is now in London and has a strange story to tell. Stothert told George that Mrs. Macmahon was greatly upset on hearing that Froissart had bequeathed everything to her, and that she is anxious to transfer the greater part of the fortune to Froissart's rightful heir, his eldest daughter, Mrs. Ferdinand Westrup, who lives with her husband in Ceylon. Mrs. Macmahon admits, he says, that she was on terms of intimacy with Froissart, who used to visit her in Cashel, her home in Tipperary, but she declares that was no reason for him to leave his entire fortune to her, especially as she has a comfortable income of her own."

He unfolded the letter and read parts of it aloud to Yootha as they strolled along the heather. The paragraph which interested her most, ran as follows:

"... Stothert also told me Mrs. Macmahon had told him that Froissart, for some time before he took his life, had been threatened with exposure of his private life if he refused to continue to pay increasingly large sums of money to certain persons who were persecuting him. . . ."

Yootha put her hand impulsively on her lover's arm.

"Charlie!" she exclaimed, "that is exactly what Cora told me she thought might have been the reason of Lord Froissart's suicide. She had heard rumors of his intimacy with some woman in Ireland, and that there was possibility of a big scandal, and she also told me Lord Froissart possessed such a sensitive nature that she could not imagine what would happen if the scandal ever came to a head. And now I have an idea. Don't you think it possible Vera Froissart may have discovered her father's secret, and that the shock of the discovery may have driven her, for very shame, to end her life?"

For some moments Preston did not answer. Then he said:

"My darling, I don't think that. What I think far more likely is that Vera may intentionally have been enlightened concerning her father's unfortunate infatuation for Mrs. Macmahon, and herself have been blackmailed by the very people who afterwards blackmailed her father, in which case the same scoundrels are indirectly responsible for the death of both father and daughter. More, I now suspect the person or persons who threatened Froissart and his daughter may be the people now threatening us if we refuse to intimidate Cora in the way they wish us to."

Yootha stopped in her walk, staring speechless at her companion.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed at last. "How can such wretches be allowed to live?"

Then her imagination began to work with extraor-

dinary rapidity. She thought of Cora's secret love for Sir Stephen Lethbridge, who had shot himself a year before; of Lord Hope-Cooper, who had drowned himself in the lake of his beautiful park at Cowrie Hall, in Perthshire; of Viscount Molesley, Leonora Vandervelt and others, whose mysterious suicides had so startled London Society, also of the well-known men and women who had, quite recently, ended their lives apparently for no reason. Was it possible all these people had been driven to desperation by the same means and finally in a fit of temporary insanity, destroyed themselves?"

Suddenly she caught her breath.

Henry Hartsilver, the husband of her friend, Cora—her dearest friend! No breath of scandal concerning him had ever been whispered, and yet——

A sentence she had read in a novel flashed back into her mind: "The private lives of most men are sealed books to all but their companion, or companions, in guilt."

Had Hartsilver's private life been a sealed book to Cora, whose habit it had been, she remembered, to jest about her husband's extraordinary respectability?

She clutched her lover's hand, and stopped again in her walk.

"Charlie!" she exclaimed in an access of emotion, "if ever, after we are married, you grow tired of me—I want you—I want you to——"

Something seemed to choke her, and Preston caught her in his arms.

"Yootha, Yootha, my own darling!" he exclaimed huskily. "What are you saying? What are you thinking about? How can you imagine for a single instant I could grow tired of you, the one woman in the world I have ever loved! Don't say what you were trying to, whatever it may have been. I don't want to hear it. It pains me when you talk like that, my precious! You don't—you can't suppose I should be such a monster as to think of any woman but you?"

"Oh, but promise—you will promise—if you feel your love for me fading, no matter how little, to tell me about it? I couldn't bear to think you pretended to love me when all the time you knew in your heart that in spite of yourself you were growing tired of me. So many men grow tired of their wives. Oh, yes, I have seen it again and again among my own friends—they marry, they love each other truly for a little while, then their love begins to cool, and then—oh, my darling, the bare thought of that possibility makes me feel faint and ill," and she began to sob bitterly as she lay listless in his arms.

It was now nearly dark, and they were still a long way from the village. Preston tried to comfort her, assuring her again and again of the impossibility of his ever growing tired of her, or indeed loving her less, but for a long time she remained in deep depression.

And while this was happening Doctor Johnson and George Blenkiron were dining together at the former's house in Wimpole Street.

They had become extremely friendly since their first meeting at the ball at the Albert Hall, owing partly to the fact of their having interests in common, and it was but natural that during dinner mention should be made of their common friend, Preston.

"I still feel anxious about Charlie Preston," Blenkinson happened to remark. "He has changed greatly of late, yet won't say what is the matter. To-day I heard an odd story to the effect that he has got himself into some sort of trouble. And yet I can't think what. He is not a man who runs after women; rather, he is inclined to shun them. On the other hand he is not in monetary difficulties, that I know for a fact."

"Where did you hear the story?" Johnson asked.

"At the club. Several men seemed to have heard it, yet all were vague as to the nature of the alleged trouble. I do hope, Johnson, he has not done anything foolish. He is such a good fellow."

"The last man to do anything foolish, I should say," the doctor replied. "I like to trace to their source the origin of vague stories, because often they do much mischief though quite devoid of foundation. Couldn't we, between us, find whence this rumor emanates?"

"I think it should be possible. I will see what can be done to-morrow."

Blenkinson was fortunate next morning in coming face to face with the member of the club who had first told him the story, or the story so far as it went.

Briefly, the rumor was that Captain Preston had been talking too freely about a certain lady—this was the new version—that he had been taken to task by an intimate friend of hers, also a member of the club, and that an action threatened unless Preston agreed to apologize in writing for what he had stated, and, in addition, agreed to pay a considerable sum to the man who brought the charge.

"Who told you all that?" Blenkiron inquired carelessly.

"Told me? I'm sure I don't remember," his informant replied quickly. "It is common talk. You will hear about it everywhere."

"Still, one ought to know who started it, because, personally, I don't believe a word of it. Preston is not a man to talk indiscreetly, especially about a woman."

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"I give it, of course, merely for what it is worth," he said. "I don't vouch for the accuracy of everything I hear."

"Then why repeat it as if it were solemn truth? I'd be more careful if I were you, Appleton," Blenkiron went on. "There's a thing called the law of slander."

Appleton stared.

"If Preston is a friend of yours," he stammered, "I suppose I ought to apologize."

"I think so too," Blenkiron answered.

But in spite of his endeavor during the day to find who had first started the story, he failed to get any information. Many of his acquaintances

had heard the rumor, but none could remember where.

Yet one person could have enlightened him. Jessica, scheming to destroy the happiness of those she knew to be striving to discover the secret of her past life, had now no scruple as to what methods she might employ to achieve her end. And for some weeks events had been occurring which, she now realized, threatened to jeopardize her position in Society, and indeed her own safety and that of her faithful companions.

"Louie," she said to Stapleton—they were at *déjeuner* with La Planta on the terrace of the Royal Hotel at Dieppe, "don't you think it time we put a check to the activities of Cora Hartsilver and her energetic admirers? I am growing tired of being harassed by their over-persistency. If our plan fails with Preston and Yootha Hagerston regarding her, I suggest that more repressive measures be resorted to at once. And I don't mind admitting now, that I believe Charles Preston is going to prove too much for us."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LITTLE HORSES.

THE re-opening of the Casino at Dieppe in 1919 was the signal, as some may remember, for an outbreak of gambling for very high stakes. This was attributed partly to the natural reaction of public feeling after the roulette tables and the *petits chevaux* had been so long *hors concours*, and partly to the fact that during the war many acquired a taste for speculation who previously had looked upon even a six-penny lottery as ungodly.

Among the regular frequenters of the Casino during August of 1919 was a very handsome Englishwoman, accompanied almost always by a tall, undistinguished-looking man of middle-age, and by a good-looking, well groomed young fellow of twenty-six or so. Night after night this trio would arrive between eight and nine o'clock, seat themselves whenever possible at the same *petits chevaux* table, until the Casino closed.

What attracted attention to them was the large sum they invariably staked at every turn of the wheel which set the horses "running"; the recklessness of their play, and their extraordinary luck. Time and again they would come out of the Casino many hundreds, and sometimes many thousands of pounds richer than when they had gone in, and

usually an *agent de police* would meet them at the entrance and accompany them across to their hotel to prevent any possibility of their being robbed.

Dieppe at that time was one of the few French seaport towns which could be visited by English folk without their being compelled first of all to comply with endless formalities, so that English people foregathered there in their thousands. It was not surprising, therefore, that when Jessica and her friends had been a week or two in the town they should suddenly come face to face in the Casino with no other than Captain Preston and his future wife.

Instantly Jessica extended her hand.

"I won't say it is odd meeting you here," she exclaimed, as she shook hands with Yootha, "because one does nothing but run across friends all day and every day, but I must say I did not expect to meet you, for I heard you were both in Monmouthshire."

"We left Abergavenny two days ago," Yootha answered quickly, "and arrived here last night. Isn't this a delightful place? I've never been here before."

"Is anybody with you?" Jessica asked.

"An aunt of mine had arranged to come, but at the last moment she was detained through illness."

Though she felt exceedingly uncomfortable at meeting Jessica again, after all that had occurred, she deemed it wiser to appear friendly than to cut the woman—her secret wish. Jessica, on the other hand, seemed really glad to meet Yootha Hagerston

once more, and Captain Preston, and when they had conversed for a little while she inquired where they were staying, and then invited them to dine, an invitation they naturally felt compelled to accept.

The Royal Hotel was crowded with well-dressed people, many of whom went across to the Casino after dinner, among them Jessica, her friends, and her two guests.

"I have been so lucky at *petits chevaux* lately," Jessica said as they all passed in. "I don't want to influence you in any way, Yootha, but if you and Captain Preston like to play my game I believe you will win. During the three weeks I have been playing I have come away a loser only three times, and not on one occasion a heavy loser. I am between three thousand and four thousand pounds to the good on my three weeks' play, and Louie and Archie won several thousands each. And yet not one of us has any system. It is just pure luck."

"I don't think Yootha will play," Preston, who had overheard Jessica's remark, cut in.

"Oh, but why not, Charlie?" the girl exclaimed in a tone of disappointment. "I have been looking forward so much to playing, though of course I am not going to gamble."

Jessica laughed, and in the laughter was a note of pity, approaching disdain.

"Naturally if Captain Preston forbids you to play, you won't play," she said lightly.

"Indeed you are mistaken, Jessica," Yootha said piqued. Then she turned to Preston.

"I am going to play, Charlie," she said, "and you will see that I shall win!"

"That's the spirit," Jessica laughed, only partly in jest. "And yet if you lose, dear, you won't blame me, I hope."

Preston bit his lip, but said nothing more. Directly he had said that Yootha wouldn't play, he had realized his want of tact. No woman likes to be thwarted, least of all before acquaintances, and by the man she is going to marry. Had he remained silent she would, he felt sure, have said of her own accord that she preferred not to play.

He lit a cigar and stood watching the game while Jessica found seats at the table and made Yootha take the vacant one beside her. Stapleton and La Planta stood just behind.

"Give me your money," Jessica said in an undertone to the girl. "I will add it to my own, and then we shall be backing the same horses and my luck, if I have any, will be yours too."

With a growing feeling of excitement, Yootha produced from her handbag a roll of paper money, counted it carefully, and handed it to her companion.

"That is all I can afford," she whispered. "You'll do the best you can with it, won't you? I do so want to win."

"Oh! that is plenty," Jessica answered, as she picked up the notes, and after counting them, placed them on top of her own sheaf.

Then, for some minutes, she watched the play closely.

"Now I am going to start," she said suddenly, and pushed a heap of paper on to one of the names of the horses.

The little horses spun around, passing one another, some gradually dropping back, others overtaking, the leaders. Then came the monotonous "*Rien n'va plus*" from the croupier; the horses began to slacken speed, went slower and slower—stopped.

Jessica had lost.

"This time we double," she said under her breath to Yootha, and pushed more money on to the name from which her former stake had just been raked.

Again the horses spun round; again the croupier droned; again they slowed down—and stopped.

Jessica had lost again.

"Had we better go on?" Yootha asked anxiously. "Or why not try another horse?"

"Nonsense," Jessica answered impatiently. "You have lost only a trifle. I have lost fifty pounds. Now watch."

She backed the same horse again, and this time the heap of notes was much bigger. The race started. For more than a minute the little horses kept changing their positions, then they moved slower and finally stopped.

Yootha uttered an exclamation of delight. The horse Jessica had backed had won!

A great pile of money, as it seemed to the girl, was pushed towards Jessica by the croupier, and at once she passed some of the pile towards her.

The next time the horses started the sum staked

by Jessica was much bigger, and she won again. Again she staked, and again she won; and again; and yet again. The crowd gathered about the table began to murmur. It grew excited when Jessica, backing different animals, won three times more in succession.

By that time Yootha was panting with excitement. Jessica, as soon as she had realized that her luck still prevailed, had gone practically nap every time with Yootha's money as well as her own. Yootha's breast rose and fell, her lips were parted, her eyes shone strangely as she watched her companion staking and winning now on almost every race. If she lost once she won twice. If she lost twice she won generally three or four times directly afterwards. Yootha, with her winnings piled in front of her, was about to speak to Jessica, when her eyes met Preston's. Her lover, standing facing her on the opposite side of the table, was calmly smoking his cigar. He made no movement, nor did his expression betray either approval or disapproval. He merely looked hard at her without smiling.

"Make Captain Preston come and sit near us," Yootha heard Jessica saying. "He looks so sad there alone. Doesn't he ever play? Has he no vices at all? Take my advice, Yootha—think twice before marrying a man who boasts that he has no vices!"

"But he doesn't boast anything of the sort—he doesn't boast at all," Yootha retorted, nettled, for again Jessica's tone annoyed her. She caught Pres-

ton's eye once more and made a sign to him; but he only shook his head and smiled rather coldly.

"You must teach him to play after you are married, dear," Jessica said. "I know that he has played," and she smiled oddly. "Look at the sum you have amassed to-night through taking my advice. Now I am going to stake again four times, and, after that, win or lose, we stop."

She staked heavily, and lost; then staked heavily again, and won three times in succession.

Then she rose, and Yootha did the same, and at once other players took their seats.

Yootha was beside herself. Though the sum she had won was small by comparison with the amount won by Jessica, to her it seemed a lot, perhaps because she had never played before.

"Let us go back and win some more," she exclaimed excitedly, casting a furtive glance backward at the table they had just left. "I do love it so! Are you always as lucky as that, Jessica?"

In the excitement of the moment she seemed quite to have forgotten her aversion for Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson; she had even forgotten her lover's presence until he suddenly approached.

"Was I not right not to take your advice?" she said to him gaily. "You ought to have played, Charlie, you really ought. You have no idea what fun it is."

"Haven't I?" he answered, looking down at her. "I wish I hadn't—I should be a rich man to-day."

"Yes," Jessica cut in with a curious laugh. "I

have been told that years ago Captain Preston lost thousands on the turf and at cards."

Yootha saw her lover make a little gesture of annoyance and at once she changed the subject.

At supper in the Casino they were joined by Stapleton and La Planta, who had disappeared while Yootha and Jessica were playing. When they were half-way through the meal, Yootha's gaze became fixed on a man at supper with friends at a table close by. Presently she turned to Preston:

"I know that man so well by sight," she said, "but can't remember who he is, or where I have seen him before. Haven't we both met him somewhere?"

"Preston cast a hasty glance in the direction indicated. The person referred to was a sleek, well-nourished man with black, rather curly hair, and a carefully waxed moustache. Yes, he too had seen him before—but where?

And then all at once he remembered. He had not seen him before, but he had seen his portrait. It hung, quite a large picture, in Stothert's office in the house with the bronze face.

He told Yootha so.

"So it does!" she exclaimed. "That is how I remember the face. I wonder who he is?"

"You wonder who he is?" Jessica inquired; she had overheard only the last sentence.

"That dark man at supper over there," and she indicated his whereabouts with her eyes.

"Oh, that is Monsieur Alphonse Michaud," Jessica replied at once. "A remarkable character, accord-

ing to all accounts. He is the director, and I suppose proprietor of the Metropolitan Secret Agency in London."

"That man is? But I thought Mr. Stothert and the woman called Camille Lenoir were the directors."

Jessica laughed.

"Have some more lobster, dear," she said. "No, Stothert and Lenoir are merely managers, just salaried people like other managers. But when have you been to the Metropolitan Agency?"

"I went there at the time of that horrible affair at the Albert Hall ball, when they thought I had stolen Mrs. Stringborg's necklace. I can't bear to think of it, even now. It seems like a nightmare still."

"Of course—I had forgotten. By the way, was that mystery ever cleared up?"

"I believe not. The whole thing was most singular."

"Didn't the Metropolitan Agency find out anything? They are generally so clever."

"Nothing of importance," Yootha answered quickly. "Oh, yes, that is the man," she said, looking again at the dark-haired stranger who had just risen from supper with his friends, three flashily-dressed women. "There is no mistaking him. The portrait is a striking likeness."

When Yootha and Preston were alone again, the girl returned to the subject of her play.

"It *is* so exciting, Charlie," she exclaimed. "I must try my luck again to-morrow, I really must. In some ways Jessica is a wonderful woman; she

tells me she nearly always wins, so that by doing just what she does——”

“You seem suddenly to have taken a fancy to Jessica,” her lover interrupted. “I never thought you would do that, dear.”

“Nor did I, Charlie,” she replied at once. “And I haven’t exactly taken a fancy to her, only I think—well, I think we have misjudged her to some extent.”

“After the things you know she said about Cora?”

“I don’t actually know she said them, because I didn’t hear her say them. After all, we were only told she said those things, and you know how people exaggerate.”

Preston was silent.

“I wish you wouldn’t play again, darling,” he suddenly exclaimed earnestly. “You have no idea how the craving to play can get hold of you. I hoped so much to-night that you would lose.”

“Hoped that I should lose!”

“Yes, so that you wouldn’t want to play again; so that you would grow disgusted with the game before it had time to get a hold on you.”

“Ah! I know why that was,” she exclaimed, her brow clearing. “Jessica said that years ago you lost a lot of money. No wonder you hate playing now. I understand your being disgruntled. How much did you lose, Charlie? And why did you never tell me? And who told Jessica?”

“I lost almost every shilling I had,” Preston answered, lowering his voice. “Otherwise I should be a rich man to-day, instead of comparatively a pauper.

The gambling fever caught me first when I was staying in Port Said, with friends, and I was very lucky. It increased and increased until, though I lost again and again, I became absolutely reckless. I think the craze for gambling is the worst form of affliction that can befall any man. But I overcame it in the end, and because I overcame it when too late I want you to overcome it before you go further."

Yootha looked up into his face, and patted his cheek playfully.

"Charlie," she said, "I am going to play to-morrow—just to-morrow. I promised Jessica I would. And now I promise you that if I lose to-morrow I will never play again. Will that satisfy you? You know I always keep my promises."

"I suppose it will have to satisfy me," her lover answered, kissing her. "But I hate your becoming intimate with Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson—you don't know how I hate it. She is not the right companion for you at all."

"Oh, don't be anxious," Yootha replied, smiling. "I can look after myself, I assure you."

CHAPTER XXII.

ANOTHER MYSTERY MAN.

"You will let me, won't you?" Jessica said coaxingly.

She was addressing Yootha, begging her to let her take the place of the aunt who had been detained at the eleventh hour, and act as her chaperone during Yootha's stay at Dieppe.

"I know there have been times when you and Cora have not thought well of me, I never knew quite why," she went on, "and I should like you to be able to assure Cora that she formed a wrong opinion of me. I always think someone must have told her things, and so prejudiced her against me."

Thus Yootha, always generously disposed, also impressionable and ready to forgive an injury, fancied or otherwise, was soon talked over by the clever woman. Indeed, the girl went so far as to persuade herself that she and Cora and Preston, and the others who had tried so hard to discover Jessica's antecedents, had suspected her unjustly. And now on the top of it all had come Jessica's introduction of Yootha to the Casino with its *petits chevaux*, Yootha's subsequent elation at her success, and Jessica's extraction of the promise from her that she would play again with her next day.

"Though I have been lucky all along, I have never

been as lucky as I was to-night," she said to Yootha as they parted for the night. "I believe you are my mascot, and to-morrow we will prove if you are or not!"

Next night Preston excused himself. He said the Casino bored him; in reality he could not bear Jessica's company, or the sight of Yootha gambling. To have opposed Yootha's wish further than he had done would, he knew, have been unwise; she might have turned upon him and said things she would afterwards have regretted saying. So with a major in the Gunners, whose acquaintance he had made at the Royal Hotel, and who had been through the war, he started off for an evening walk up the hill to the back of the town as soon as Jessica and Yootha had gone across to the Casino, where they were to meet Stapleton and La Planta.

It was one of those warm, balmy nights, the air perfectly still, which we enjoy so rarely in this country. By the time Preston and his companions had reached the summit of the steep ascent the moon, in its second quarter, was shining down across the streets and houses, imparting to the city the aspect of a toy town, and illuminating the sea for many a mile beyond it. As they sat contemplating the picturesque panorama their gaze became focused on the lights of the Casino.

"Don't you play at all?" the major, whose name was Guysburg, inquired as he lit a fresh cigar and offered one to Preston.

"Not now," Preston answered dryly. "I played

too much in my time; games of chance and backing horses bit me hard when I was almost a boy."

The major laughed.

"Boys will be boys," he said lightly, as he puffed at his cigar.

"And fools will be fools," Preston retorted. "I was one of the fools who 'made their prayer,' and have regretted it ever since."

"Yet you have no objection to your future wife's playing? That seems to me strange."

"Indeed, I have the strongest objection," Preston answered quickly, in a strange voice. "I have been through the mill, and I know what it means when the craving to gamble gets a grip on you which, try as you will, you can't shake off. Unfortunately Miss Hagerston met an acquaintance here yesterday—that tall, handsome woman—you must have noticed her—who last night induced her to play, and they won a lot of money. Miss Hagerston became so exultant that she promised Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson she would play with her again to-night, and nothing I could say would dissuade her. I can only hope that to-night their luck will be reversed, and then Miss Hagerston will see the folly of the whole thing."

For a minute the major did not reply. Then he said abruptly:

"Who are the two men who are always in Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's company—I think you said that was her name?"

"Just friends. They are constantly with her in London too, where she is well-known in Society;

some say there is no romance or scandal associated with their friendship; others say there is."

For a long while they conversed on various topics, and particularly about the war. Presently the major said:

"I noticed a person in the hotel to-day who had a curious reputation before the war—a man called Michaud, Alphonse Michaud. Have you ever heard of him?"

"Odd, your asking that," Preston answered. "He was pointed out to me last night at supper at the Casino—a dark man, rather Jewish looking, with black wavy hair."

"That's the fellow. He was mixed up in several shady affairs some years before the war, and I understand he is now 'commander-in-chief' of a most successful inquiry agency in London, with branches on the Continent and abroad. I suppose it is the old idea, 'set a thief to catch a thief,'" and he laughed.

"What do you know about him?" Preston asked, suddenly interested. "How the Metropolitan Secret Agency is so successful in ferreting out secrets in people's private lives has long puzzled London Society, also the London police, and I have often heard it hinted that the Agency in question of which I now understand Michaud is the moving force, has recourse to questionable methods to obtain its information."

"That I can believe," Major Guysburg answered, "if Michaud has to do with it. Mind, he is an

extraordinarily clever man. One ramp he was generally supposed eight or ten years ago to have had a hand in concerned the insurance of some valuable stones owned by a diamond merchant whose place of business is in the Kalverstraat in Amsterdam—I formerly lived near Rotterdam. Within six months after the insurance had been effected the stones disappeared from the merchant's safe, and to this day nobody knows how the robbery was carried out—the merchant kept the key of his safe on him day and night. The opinion in Amsterdam, however, was that Michaud, who had insured the stones and who was paid the insurance under protest, was himself the thief. Oh, but there were other queer doings in which he was said to be mixed up, but they would take too long to tell. Incidentally he was supposed at one time to have in his possession a remarkable drug, a sort of perfumed poison, with most peculiar attributes—it was said that the drug, properly administered, rendered people unconscious, and left their minds a blank after they recovered consciousness, from a period before they inhaled it."

Preston became greatly interested.

"Tell me, major," he said, "did you read the report recently of the exhumation of the body of a Jew who died suddenly, and under rather mysterious circumstances, at a ball at the Albert Hall?"

"No. I am not a great newspaper reader."

"Well, naturally I was interested in the affair because I and a friend of mine found the man dead in one of the boxes during the ball," and he went

on to give Major Guysburg a brief account of what had occurred that night. "Why I am interested in what you say about that peculiar drug is that the man who was believed to know something about the Jew's death, or rather what caused it, admitted having imported from Shanghai, for his own use only, he said, a drug apparently similar to the one you have just mentioned—it may, indeed, have been the identical drug."

"Shanghai, did you say? Why, I remember now that is the place where the drug I have told you about was supposed to have come from."

"How strange! And there was another affair when apparently some drug of the sort was used, but on that occasion the victim was La Planta himself."

"La Planta! The name sounds familiar. Now where have I heard that name before?"

He racked his brain for a minute, but in vain.

"La Planta," Preston said, "was the man believed to know something of the cause of the Jew's death, but nothing could be proved against him. You may be surprised to hear that La Planta is the younger of the two men constantly with the woman we have just been speaking about, Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson."

"Indeed? Then are the lady and her two friends acquainted with Michaud?"

"No, they know him only by sight."

"Ah! I remember where I have heard of La Planta before," Guysburg exclaimed suddenly. "He represented an insurance company in Amsterdam

and was called upon to give expert opinion at the time of the diamond robbery I have told you about. Yes, and the company he represented, I remember, was directed by the late Lord Froissart, who committed suicide some time ago."

"Really this is remarkable, Major Guysburg," Preston exclaimed. "You and I meet at haphazard, we happen to go for a walk, and we find that we each know several things in which the other is directly interested, and which seem to fit into each other like bits of a puzzle. Are you staying long in Dieppe? I should like to talk over several matters with you, and my future wife would be interested to hear what you have just told me."

"And I should be most pleased to tell her. My intention at present is to stay here a week or ten days longer. After that I may go to New York."

It was late when they arrived back at the Royal, where both were staying, but Yootha had not yet returned from the Casino. Nor had Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson come back, they were told at the office. They had just turned to go into the vestibule when they came face to face with Alphonse Michaud, accompanied by the three women Preston had seen him with the night before.

"Most remarkable thing I have ever known," he was saying. "That woman seems to bewitch the tables." He turned to the hotel manager who was passing.

"Tell me," he said, "do they often break the bank at your Casino?"

"Break the bank?" the manager repeated with a smile. "I have been here twenty-two years and can remember only one occasion when the bank failed; that must have been fifteen or more years ago, and the man who broke it was the son of Don Carlos—a little while previously he had won sixty thousand pounds at Monte Carlo and taken that sum away. Has any one broken the bank to-night?" he ended with a laugh.

"Yes, that tall, handsome woman staying here who is generally accompanied by two men—one a middle-aged man, the other a youth. Who is she?"

"You must mean Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson," the manager answered. "You don't mean to say that she has broken the bank!"

"She has indeed. She and her two friends and a girl with them sat down to roulette between half-past eight and nine, and luck pursued them from the very outset. We have been watching them for a long time, and I never saw anything like their luck. The mere fact of their backing a number seemed to make the number come up. After a little while the crush round the table became so great that few besides those seated were able to play at all. Finally the croupiers declared the bank was broken, and that there would be no more play to-night."

"You will forgive my speaking to you," Preston cut in, "but are the people you speak of returning to the hotel now, do you happen to know? They are friends of mine."

Michaud looked hard at him.

"Were you not with them at supper at the Casino last night?" he inquired. "I am sure I saw you there."

"Quite likely. I was with them."

"Yes, they are probably on their way back by now. They were waiting, when I saw them last, for additional police escort," and he laughed. "You ought to have been with them to-night, sir," he added. "You have missed the opportunity of a lifetime, because they all back the same numbers, so that you would probably have done the same."

He had hardly stopped speaking when a car drew up at the hotel entrance, and Jessica and her party alighted, accompanied by two police officials.

Preston saw at once that Yootha was almost hysterical. She kept laughing at nothing, and talking at a great pace the greatest nonsense. In addition to her bulging bag, she had slung on her arm a common sack tied at the top with string. Directly she saw her lover she rushed up to him, flung her arms about his neck, and kissed him passionately in front of everybody.

"Allow me to congratulate you, ladies and gentlemen," Michaud said with a profound bow. "I have been watching your play all the evening, and your luck is the most astonishing thing I have ever seen. I expect the Casino will be glad to see the last of you," and he laughed, "but only the Casino," and he ogled Yootha. "Good night, ladies and gentlemen." He turned to Preston, "Good night to you, sir," and with his three companions, who had been

standing by looking rather sour, he passed through the vestibule and disappeared.

For a quarter of an hour the party, which now included Preston and Major Guysburg, remained in the vestibule talking over the exciting evening. Now and again guests returning from the Casino would come up, apologize for speaking, and then offer their congratulations. The only two who remained calm, and apparently unaffected by what had happened, were Preston and the major.

When Preston kissed Yootha good night in the corridor before they parted for the night, he looked down at her sadly.

"My darling," he said, "have you forgotten what happened that night at Henley? The day is approaching when it will be necessary for us to do one thing or the other regarding Cora, and of course there is only one thing we can do."

"How do you mean—'only one thing'?"

Preston gazed at her, speechless.

"Jessica," Yootha went on, "was talking to me about Cora this evening, and hinted to me things about her which, if they are true, would tempt me never to speak to her again. I am inclined to think we have overrated Cora, and that her alleged friendship is not wholly disinterested."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A FRIEND INDEED!

WHILE the events described in the preceding chapter were taking place in Dieppe, Cora Hartsilver was visiting friends who had a place in Jersey, near Gorey. They were people she had known intimately before her marriage, friends of Sir Stephen Lethbridge whom she had loved so terribly even after her marriage, but she had not seen them since her husband's death, though several times they had asked her to stay with them.

She was glad to be out of London at last. The place had begun to pall on her soon after the Armistice, also her friend, Yootha Hagerston, seemed gradually to have changed in her manner towards her in a way she could not exactly describe, but which she felt. She did not blame Yootha for this change, though secretly she resented it. She attributed it to her friend's engagement, and hoped that after her marriage Yootha would become her old self again, for she could not believe that her long affection for her could have cooled.

One morning among her correspondence she found a registered letter which mystified and disconcerted her exceedingly. Unsigned, and with no address, it ran as follows:

"The writer possesses nine letters written by you to the late Sir Stephen Lethbridge, and five written by Sir Stephen to you, *after your marriage to the late Henry Hartsilver*. The former are dated respectively ——" here followed the dates, also the addresses from which the letters had been written. "The latter are dated ——" and then came another list.

"These documents," the letter continued, "are wholly compromising, and photographic prints of them all will be posted in registered envelopes to the whole of your circle of personal friends and acquaintances unless six thousand pounds is paid to me on or before the first of October next. This is no vain threat, and if the contents of these documents have faded from your memory the writer can send you photographic prints to confirm the accuracy of the statements contained in this letter.

"Reply at once by advertisement in the personal column of *The Morning Post*, and sign it 'A. B. — from Y. Z.' "

Cora stared at the letter for a minute, then read it through again. Written on a typewriter, it had been posted, according to the postmark, in the London West Central district. The letters to which it referred she remembered only too well. They were all the letters she had written to Sir Stephen and that he had written to her during the time she had been married and while her husband was alive.

She was alone in her room, and she sat down on the bed and began to think. Who in the world could have obtained possession of those letters, especially those she had received? Some servant? Mentally

she reviewed the various servants who had been in her employment during the past years, but none seemed the sort likely to steal letters or attempt to levy blackmail.

Then, all at once, she remembered Yootha's telling her long ago, one day when they had been talking in confidence about poor Stephen Lethbridge's sad end, that her father had told her that strange-looking men and women had been in the habit of visiting Sir Stephen at Abbey Hall, in his place in Cumberland, shortly before his death. She wondered now, as she had wondered then, who those people could have been, and why they had visited Sir Stephen.

But that, after all, she now reflected, was not of moment. What did matter was that her letters should be in the keeping of someone determined to do her an injury which would affect the whole of her future life if she refused to buy them back at the sum named in the letter she held in her hand.

For a quarter of an hour or more she sat there, pondering deeply. She had received in the course of her life several hard knocks, and not once had her spirit failed her. It came back to her now that Stephen had more than once warned her to be more careful about what she put in writing; but then, she reflected, had he not himself been almost as reckless every time he wrote to her? Both were emotional by nature; both were highly imaginative, and they became carried away by their feelings when in correspondence with each other.

That her anonymous correspondent had not ex-

aggerated when he declared the letters to be "wholly compromising," she well knew. Indeed, at the recollection of some of the violent love passages they contained she shuddered. What would become of her, she wondered feverishly, if those passages, written in her handwriting, or Sir Stephen's, were to become public property? Oh, how mad she had been to write such things, she exclaimed aloud. The one drop of comfort in her bitterness was the reflection that Henry no longer lived, that he would never know.

Henry!

As she spoke her husband's name a strange thought flashed in upon her. The mystery of his suicide had never been fathomed, nor had she ever succeeded in puzzling out even a possible solution to the problem, and now, all at once——

Her brain began to work with extraordinary rapidity. During his lifetime he had often read her curtain lectures which had bored her almost to distraction—he had never tired of impressing upon her his views regarding married women who carried on flirtations, and his opinion in general upon a wife's duties to her husband. At first, when he had spoken thus, her conscience had cried aloud, and she had believed herself a hypocrite and not fit to be married to any honest man, seeing that she loved Stephen Lethbridge so madly.

Then, as time went on, she had succeeded in smothering her conscience by reminding herself that Henry had married her in reality against her will,

therefore that she had a right to love Stephen if she chose. Later, she had gone a step further by cultivating the habit of analyzing her feelings calmly and dispassionately, and contrasting her lack of affection for her husband with her all-consuming passion for Sir Stephen, and more than once when so engaged she had secretly wondered what would happen to Henry, and for that matter to herself, should Henry by any terrible mishap discover her deep secret.

"I believe," she recollected saying to herself once, "he would either kill Stephen and me, or end his own life."

And now in a flash the thought had come to her—could Henry have, by some means, become aware of her hypocrisy, of the mental double life she had been leading, and in a moment of frenzy at his sudden disillusionment deliberately have ended his existence? And if so, was it possible the writer of the anonymous letter she had just received had been the person to impart that information to her husband, presumably in the hope of extorting blackmail by threatening to make the facts public, and that Henry had in consequence taken his life?

A terrible thought, yet the longer she dwelt on it the more plausible the theory appeared to her to be. Quite likely, too, she reflected, that if this were so the scoundrel, foiled in his first attempt to extort payment for the letters, would presently make another attempt, but that before doing so he would let a reasonable period elapse.

This discovery, as she believed it to be, and the reflection that now she must either pay the sum demanded or stand disgraced before everybody she knew, drove her almost frantic. In her agony of mind she began to pace the room, trying in vain to evolve some means of escape from her unknown persecutor.

Then she began to ask herself whom she could consult, of whom she could take counsel? And again there was nobody. Had the matter been one of less delicacy, less secret, she knew several people, intimate friends others, to whom she would readily have unbosomed herself. But to admit to anyone, even her dearest friend, that she had virtually been carrying on an intrigue, even an harmless intrigue, while married, she felt would be impossible. Besides would anybody, not excepting her dearest friend, believe the intrigue to have been harmless?

Suddenly she stopped pacing the room. She had read in the Jersey paper that morning that on the previous day a Doctor Johnson—the Doctor Johnson whom she had before consulted on very secret matters—had arrived from Weymouth by the ss. *Ibex* and gone to the Brees Hotel.

The news had afforded her extreme satisfaction, and she had said to herself at once that they must meet again. Now she remembered how kind and considerate he had been on the occasions when she had sought his advice. Also he was a doctor, and doctors were accustomed to receiving confidences which they never, in any circumstances, disclosed,

she reflected. Supposing she were to approach him with reference to this dreadful affair, tell him exactly what had happened, how, though married, she had been hopelessly, though harmlessly, in love with the late Sir Stephen Lethbridge, and if then she were to show him the letter she had received that day threatening her with blackmail——

Somehow she felt she would be able to trust him implicitly, and that his advice would be sound, so on the following afternoon, after telephoning that she wished to see him particularly, she called at the Brees and was at once shown up.

The doctor was frankly glad to see her, and gratified when he found that she wished to consult him on an unprofessional matter.

"I had a letter from Preston the other day," he said, when they had conversed for a few minutes, "and he seems to have recovered his health and spirits considerably. I suppose you know that Jessica and her inseparables are staying at the hotel in Dieppe where he is; but you may not have heard that they and Miss Hagerston succeeded between them in breaking the bank at the Casino some nights ago."

"I had not heard that Jessica was there at all," Cora answered. "But then I have not heard from Yootha since she went there—she wrote to me last from Monmouthshire. But surely you are mistaken, doctor, in saying that she helped Jessica and her friends to break the bank? Yootha was barely on speaking terms with Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson the last time she wrote to me."

"Indeed I am not mistaken, Mrs. Hartsilver," Johnson replied with an odd look. "Between ourselves, I rather wish I were, because, as you know, I am not partial to that woman. Preston told me in his letter that she and Miss Hagerston had suddenly become extraordinarily friendly, and he seemed a good bit upset about it. They all met by accident at the Royal Hotel, it seems, and Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson induced Miss Hagerston to play with her at the tables at the Casino, and they had the most amazing luck—even before they broke the bank. Miss Hagerston, he says, has become bitten by the gambling mania, and you know what that means—or perhaps you don't; I hope you don't."

It was some time before Cora could brace herself to broach the subject on which she had come to consult Doctor Johnson. She had been silent for a minute, feeling extremely embarrassed, when suddenly she said:

"I have come to see you, Doctor Johnson, to ask your advice on a matter I feel I couldn't speak about to anybody else, and of course you will treat what I am going to say as strictly confidential. Doctor, I am in very great trouble."

"I am sorry to hear that," he answered quietly. "I take it you mean mental trouble."

"Yes. Perhaps before I say more you had better read this," and quickly producing the anonymous letter from her bag, she handed it to him.

He read it through calmly, his face immobile. Then he read it again. After that he folded it and handed it back to her.

"An unfortunate incident," he observed as he lit a cigarette. "Have you any idea who the writer is?"

"Not the slightest."

"A woman, I should say, possibly in league with some man. You won't pay, of course."

"But then what am I to do? Think what will happen if I don't pay, doctor!"

"Am I to conclude from that that the allegation is true? Did you write the letters, and were the others written to you?"

Cora colored violently, and looked down.

"Yes," she said, almost in a whisper.

"That is a pity," the doctor answered. "Still Mrs. Hartsilver, even the best of us make mistakes at times, and when a mistake has been made the only thing to do is to think of the best way of avoiding unpleasant consequences. I know perhaps better than you do how on occasions a woman's heart can temporarily overrule her brain and better judgment, and for that reason I look leniently on what I call 'heart influence.' Did your husband know anything of this? You will, I am sure, in the circumstances forgive my asking."

"So far as I know, he knew nothing," Cora answered quickly. "But since receiving that letter I have wondered if he could, by some means, have found out, or if someone can have told him, and whether—whether it can have been that knowledge which drove him to end his life."

"I think that is possible, Mrs. Hartsilver; yet

I don't consider you are to blame. I have learned several things concerning your marriage, why you married a man you never loved, and why——"

"Who told you that?" Cora interrupted. "Oh, Doctor Johnson, how did you find out?"

"That is not of consequence, nor is the fact of your husband taking his life of consequence now. The past is finished and done with. What matters to-day—the only thing that matters—is what is going to happen in the immediate future."

He paused, and then continued:

"You say you want my advice, but if I give it I shall expect you, mind, to follow it."

"You may depend on my doing that."

"Good. My advice, then, is that you do not, in any circumstances, pay this hush money, or pay any hush money at all. The writer of the letter you have shown me is almost for certain a professional blackmailer, perhaps the only class of criminal to get, in this country, what he deserves when caught. What we must do then is set a trap for him—or her. And that I think I can do successfully, because I did it comparatively recently with most satisfactory results in a somewhat similar case. Do you remember Lord Froissart's suicide, and before that his daughter's suicide, Mrs. Hartsilver?"

"Indeed I do"

"Blackmail in each case, though it was never made public. I am speaking to you now in strictest confidence; both are dead, or I should not tell even you. Poor Vera Froissart fell madly in love with a

scoundrel, who wronged her and subsequently attempted to blackmail her. Afraid to tell anybody, she let terror of exposure prey upon her mind until in a moment of actual madness she made away with herself. Some time after her death the same scoundrel approached her father, Lord Froissart, told him why his daughter had ended her life, and threatened exposure if Froissart refused to pay.

"Froissart paid. He paid again, and then a third time. He was not a man of much backbone, or of strong mentality. When the blackguard to whom he had already paid thousands came to him again for a further sum, Froissart, believing that he must in the end be reduced to beggary through the man's extortions, went down to Bournemouth and threw himself off the cliff.

"The night before he had written a number of letters at his club—the Junior Carlton. One of those letters was addressed to me—I was his medical adviser. In it he told me everything, and directly I had read the letter I burnt it, as he wished me to do. This is the first time I have revealed his secret, and it is the last time I shall speak of it. I have revealed it to you that it may serve as a warning of what may happen if ever you are so unwise as to pay hush money to anybody. Froissart had mentioned the name of his persecutor, and with some trouble I got the man arrested and convicted. He is in penal servitude to-day, and will be for some years."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TIGHTENING GRIP.

DOCTOR JOHNSON'S optimism and words of encouragement set Cora's mind at rest to some extent, but she still felt anxious. She did not expect to be back in England for several weeks, and Johnson had told her that he intended to remain in Jersey about the same length of time. What, she asked herself, would happen meanwhile if she ignored the anonymous letter, as he advised? True, he had pointed out that the writer of the letter could have no desire to ruin her good name, and that she threatened only in order to terrorize her into paying the money. If she did not reply in the *Morning Post*, her persecutor would, he had assured her, write her another letter before taking any action. Indeed, he had declared that she would probably receive several letters before the writer attempted to carry out her threat.

"And remember," he had ended, "the more letters you get, and the more they threaten, the more evidence you possess to help to convict the villainess when she is arrested. Give her as much rope as possible, then strike hard and suddenly."

They had wandered a considerable way along the sea wall, which runs beside the coast, one evening some days later, when Johnson happened to remark:

"Whom do you think I ran across in the gardens at the Pomme d'Or, Mrs. Hartsilver? Why, the young journalist, Harry Hopford. He was in high spirits, as he generally is, and told me he had been here several days, spending his holiday. When I mentioned that you were here too, he became quite excited, and said he 'did hope' he would have the pleasure of seeing you again. He is meeting me at the Pomme d'Or to-night. Won't you join us? It is a Bohemian little place, but I can call for you, and I think you will be amused."

But Cora explained it would be impossible, as the friends with whom she was staying were giving a dinner party, she said, from which she could not well absent herself.

"I only wish I could come," she added with sincerity. "It would amuse me more than meeting a lot of people I don't know, and have no particular wish to know. And I should like to see Mr. Hopford again, too. He has always been so kind."

Hopford was full of news when he met the doctor at the Pomme d'Or that evening.

"Can you tell me, Johnson," was one of his first questions, "why Captain Preston now always carries about a loaded automatic?"

"I had no idea he did," the doctor replied in surprise. "Who told you?"

"Well," Hopford answered, "I happened to find it out, and in rather a curious way. In The Mitre, off Fleet Street, the other day, I got into conversation with quite a good fellow who had served during

the war. We had one or two drinks together, and then he mentioned incidentally that a Captain Preston had been his company commander. When I told him that I, too, had served under Preston, he became quite communicative. Preston seems to be a sort of hero in his eyes. He told me all that Preston did during the war—he has a fine record, Johnson—and then added:

“‘They ought to put him in Ireland—he always has a loaded automatic in his pocket.’

“‘I inquired the reason, and he went on:

“‘I can’t say, but during Henley regatta he told me to keep his pistol loaded, and a week later he took to carrying it about with him.’

“‘The fellow had told me he was Preston’s servant.

“‘Does he expect to be attacked?’ I then asked jokingly. And he answered quite seriously, ‘Yes, I think he does.’

“‘And by whom?’ I said, becoming interested.

“‘He looked about him, then replied under his breath: ‘I don’t know, but he told me once he had met some queer folk in China, in Shanghai, and I’ve a notion some of those folk may now be in London and have some sort of a down on him.’”

“‘Did he say anything more?’ Johnson inquired.

“‘Yes. He said he was worried about ‘the Captain,’ thought he ought not to marry, and hinted there was a mystery of some sort about the lady he meant to marry, meaning Miss Hagerston, of course. By the way, Johnson, I suppose you read in the papers that Miss Hagerston and Mrs. Mervyn-

Robertson, La Planta, and Stapleton, between them broke the bank at the Casino at Dieppe the other night?"

"I didn't read about it, but I heard about it."

"And that reminds me," Hopford went on, "that I have heard queer rumors about Preston lately. A bank clerk I know, who often gives me scraps of exclusive news, and has never yet let me down, assures me that Preston is being blackmailed. It's a long story and rather complicated."

"What, more blackmail?"

"How do you mean 'more' blackmail?" Hopford asked quickly, ever on the alert for news.

"I was thinking of a case I heard of the other day," Johnson replied, anxious to cover his slip of the tongue.

Hopford looked at him hard.

"What the clerk told me," he said a moment later, "was that Preston would be driven, if not careful, to pay hush money—he mentioned a big sum—to some woman who threatens to reveal something queer about that beautiful Mrs. Hartsilver. I saw Preston not long ago, and thought he looked ill and worried. Have you heard anything by any chance?"

"If I had I shouldn't tell a journalist," Johnson answered with a smile. "No, not even you, Hopford."

The lad laughed.

"And I can't blame you," he said, "though personally when I promise not to print news told me

in confidence I never do print it. But there are a lot of little mysteries we both know about which have not yet been cleared up, and somehow several seem to me to be directly or indirectly connected with one another.

"First, there was the epidemic of unaccountable suicides between a year and eighteen months ago, when Lord Hope-Cooper, Sir Stephen Lethbridge, Viscount Molesley, Lord Froissart and his daughter, that queer woman, Leonora Vandervelt, Henry Hartsilver, and half-a-dozen more put an end to themselves apparently for no reason, and then there was the second epidemic of the same sort only a month or two ago.

"In addition there are the queer stories concerning Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson and her two inseparables; Levi Schomberg's strange death; the rumors to do with Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's husband—some say he is alive and some say he isn't; that affair regarding La Planta's being obviously drugged, though to this day nobody knows who drugged him, why he was drugged, or even where he was drugged; Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's fainting fit at her own house on the same night, followed by the theft of her jewels; the robbery and recovery at the Albert Hall ball of Mrs. Stringborg's necklace; Stapleton's anxiety that the theft of Mrs. Robertson's jewels should be attributed to Mrs. Hartsilver; oh, and several other things.

"The clerk I mentioned just now also told me that at one time Archie La Planta represented an

insurance firm in Amsterdam of which Lord Froissart was the principal director, and that before his death Froissart had been a good deal upset at what seems to have been a trick played upon his Company by some of the policy holders—apparently they insured valuable jewels and uncut precious stones which subsequently were stolen by the very men who had insured them, or rather by some of their accomplices; but as nothing could be proved the Company had to pay the full claim, though it did so under protest. Altogether, Johnson, there is a good deal I want to find out, but it will be a fine scoop for my paper if I succeed, and I feel confident I shall do so when I get to Paris.”

“You did not tell me you were going to Paris,” Johnson said, smiling at the lad’s enthusiasm. “Or for that matter that you meant to try to solve the bunch of problems you have just enumerated.”

“Didn’t I?” Hopford exclaimed. “Well, that is the idea. I am here for a short holiday, then I go to Paris where I have a friend on the staff of *Le Matin*, an extraordinarily clever fellow with a genius for putting together puzzles of this sort. He was in London last month, and when in course of conversation I chanced to speak about the two epidemics of suicide there had been among our society people, and mentioned the names of some of the victims, he became greatly interested, and started asking me all sorts of questions.

“He referred to the subject several times again while in town, and finally told me that if I could

go to Paris he thought he would be able to put me on to at least one useful clue, and suggested we might work the thing together—the subject would interest *Le Matin* too, he said. Thereupon I consulted my chief who, though skeptical as to the likelihood of my succeeding, gave me leave to go to Paris for a week or two. Tell me, Johnson, have you any friends there who might be of use to me?”

The doctor pondered for some moments.

“Where are you going to stay in Paris?” he asked suddenly.

“I stayed at the Brighton in the Rue de Rivoli the last time I was there,” Hopford answered, “but I thought this time of finding some little place in Clichy—my friend lives in Montmartre. Why do you ask?”

“A friend of mine, a mental specialist—incidentally he is interested in your sort of work, and is wonderfully shrewd in putting two and two together—has a quaint little *appartement* in the rather slummy Rue des Petits Champs, near the Place Jeanne d’Arc. If you would like to stay with him I know he would like to have you, and I feel confident you would hit it off together. He and I shared a house in Hong Kong, when I practiced there, and after a while I appointed him my *locum tenens* in Shanghai.”

“Shanghai!”

Hopford seemed suddenly interested. For several seconds he did not speak.

"Curious coincidence that," he said at last. "I just wanted to meet someone who knew Shanghai, and I had forgotten you had lived in Hong Kong."

"The friend I speak of knows Shanghai inside out, which I am afraid I don't," Johnson answered. "Shall I give you an introduction to him?"

"I wish you would, Johnson," Hopford answered eagerly. "And under the circumstances I should like to stay with him, if he will have me. Do you happen ever to have known a man in Shanghai named Fobart Robertson?"

"I should say so!" his companion exclaimed. "One of the worst—a mere adventurer. He married——"

He checked himself.

"Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson!" Hopford said excitedly.

"I didn't say so," Johnson replied, slightly put out by the young man's rapidity of thought.

"You didn't say so, but you mean it—and you know it was so!" Hopford observed triumphantly. "This is splendid! The parts of the puzzle are fitting themselves in just as I expected they would. Now I wonder if you knew another man out East, in Shanghai or Hong Kong, or some place of that sort, whose name was Timothy Macmahon? When Lord Froissart committed suicide he left the whole of his fortune to a Mrs. Macmahon, who is Timothy Macmahon's widow."

"Yes. Macmahon, too, lived in Shanghai at one time; also Julius Stringborg, who now lives in Upper

Bruton Street, and was a spirit merchant in Shanghai and Hong Kong when I practiced out there—husband of the woman whose necklace was stolen at the Albert Hall ball and who charged Miss Hagerston with the theft, if you remember. But, as I say, my former *locum tenens* who now lives in Paris is the man you want to meet if you are seeking information about former British residents in Shanghai. Before you leave Jersey I will give you a letter addressed to him.”

“That’s awfully good of you, Johnson,” Hopford said in a tone of deep gratitude. “You have no idea how keen I am to solve the problem of all these mysteries, as much out of personal curiosity as from a natural desire to score a newspaper scoop.”

For a long time they continued to converse, and the more they talked the more deeply impressed Johnson became by the young man’s exceptional acumen.

“If at any time you should hear any gossip concerning Mrs. Hartsilver, Hopford,” he presently said carelessly, “you might let me know in confidence.”

Hopford turned quickly.

“Why,” he exclaimed. “I have heard gossip about her already, and I don’t believe a word of it. Shall I tell you what it is? Of course you won’t repeat it.”

“Of course. What have you heard?”

The anxiety his tone betrayed was not lost upon the young journalist, though Johnson had tried

to conceal it. Instantly he concluded the doctor must be interested in the young widow. "Yes," he commented mentally, "obviously deeply interested."

"Well, what I have heard," he said, "came from two sources, and was to the effect that Preston and Mrs. Hartsilver were together trying to conceal some secret of a rather scandalous nature. But, as I say, I don't believe a word of it."

"From whom did you hear it?"

"From two fellows in the office—two of our reporters. As you know, or perhaps you don't know, reporters never give away their source of information, and I told them both to their faces that I knew Mrs. Hartsilver personally, and was convinced the story was a lie."

"What did they say to that?"

"Oh, they laughed. One of them said that naturally in the circumstances my opinion must be biased, and that subsequent events would show if the report were true or not."

"They won't publish anything in the newspaper, will they?" Johnson asked; and Hopford was again struck by the anxiety in his voice and face.

"Set your mind at rest on that point," he replied. "They dare not. Even if the tale were true, to publish it might be libelous. Certainly I will tell you at once, Johnson, if I hear anything more."

It was nearly closing time at the Pomme d'Or, and they rose to go.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CITY OF SMILES.

PARIS has greatly changed since the war. The *bonhomie* of the boulevards, so marked a feature before the year 1914, has subsided a good deal. The inhabitants, considered collectively, are more serious.

Hopford and Johnson's friend, Idris Llanvar, with whom Hopford was now staying, were discussing these and other matters one morning in Paris, when they were joined by Hopford's friend who worked for *Le Matin*. Tall, slim, good-looking, and with the charming manner peculiar to descendants of the old French noblesse, he raised his hat as he approached, then apologized in excellent English for his unpunctuality.

"We had a fire at the office of *Le Matin*," he said, "which almost prevented the paper from coming out; but thanks to the courtesy of the *Journal des Débats*, which afforded us facilities for printing, the situation was saved at the eleventh hour."

He poured himself out a glass of wine from the bottle on the table—they were sitting outside a café on the Boulevard des Italiens—and continued:

"I have a proposal to make to you, Hopford, and to you, too, monsieur," he said, turning to Idris Llanvar, "which, if it meets with your approval, may have a rather important result. I understand

from my friend Hopford here that we three are to put our heads together to try to make certain discoveries which, if we succeed, will create something of a sensation when made public. I have already told Hopford I know of certain happenings in Paris which, I believe, bear directly on affairs which have occurred in London within the past year or two, and more particularly recently. Now, two friends of mine belong to the Secret Service Police of Paris, and what they don't know concerning the movements and methods of international criminals is, as you say in England, not worth knowing. One is a man, the other a woman. They are coming to me to-night, and I hope you will both come along too, so that the five of us may discuss certain affairs. Will that suit you both?"

And so, late that night, four men and a woman, all of exceptionally keen intelligence, endowed with the peculiar attributes which go to the making of a clever police detective or a successful newspaper reporter, were gathered together in a small room in one of those quaint, low-roofed houses with which visitors to the Quartier Latin are familiar.

The woman was an odd-looking person of about twenty-eight or twenty-nine, with hair cut short like a man's, a pale face, firm lips, and dark, extremely shrewd eyes. She bore the reputation, Hopford's friend said, of possessing more dogged perseverance than any other member of the Paris detective force. During the war, he told them, she had succeeded in bringing no less than seven spies

to book without any assistance whatever, all of whom had eventually been put to death.

Hopford had finished giving the assembled party all the information he possessed concerning the two epidemics of suicide in London; the various thefts which had occurred in connection with this narrative; and other matters with which the reader is acquainted, and was lighting a fresh cigar, when the woman, after a pause, inquired:

"This Madame Vandervelt who threw herself out of the hotel window. When did that happen?"

Hopford mentioned the date. He had all data at his fingers' ends.

"I knew Leonora Vandervelt," she said. "For months we shared an *appartement* close to the Madeleine. By that means I became intimate with her; and eventually I discovered something I wanted to know about her—at that time she masqueraded under an assumed name. Finally I brought about her arrest, and she was sentenced to a year's imprisonment, though she deserved three years. Upon her release she left France, and I lost sight of her. This is the first time since then that I have heard of her. I did not know she was dead. At one time she and Angela Robertson of Shanghai were close friends. Then they quarreled, parted in anger, and Angela Robertson, whom you call Jessica Mervyn-Robertson, declared in my hearing she would be revenged—revenged for what I did not know. That, of course, was before Vandervelt went to prison.

"When Vandervelt became suspected of larceny, I went at once to Angela Robertson, who then lived in Paris, and placed all the facts before her. As I expected, she jumped at the chance of getting her revenge, and largely through the information she gave me I was able to bring Leonora Vandervelt to book. And now you tell me Vandervelt committed suicide. Of course I know who made her do it. It was Angela Robertson again."

"How do you know that?" Hopford inquired. He had listened attentively to every word.

"No matter. You will gather that later. Do you know how Mrs. Robertson comes to be so rich?"

"Through levying blackmail I should imagine," Hopford answered quickly.

"As you say, through levying blackmail. She and her companions you have told me about, Archie La Planta and Aloysius Stapleton, are three of the most cunning and persistent blackmailers in your country. They have practiced the 'art' in Continental capitals, and now reside in London because your countryfolk are the most easy to blackmail, also because they have much money and are easily induced to part with it. You say she pretends to be Australian. She is not Australian, nor has she been in Australia, though she had a married sister living in Monkarra, in Queensland, years ago, governess to the children of a rich sheep farmer there. When Mrs. Robertson and Stapleton left Shanghai for good they went first to Amsterdam, where they became acquainted with Archie La Planta, a rogue in

every way, though a charming man to talk to. At that time he was representing a British insurance company in Amsterdam."

"Controlled by Lord Froissart," Hopford put in.

"Yes. Controlled by the late Lord Froissart. While there," she went on, "La Planta was introduced to Angela Robertson and to Stapleton by a man named Alphonse Michaud, of whose occupation the less said the better. Finally the four lived together at an hotel in the Kalverstraat, the name of which has for the moment escaped me."

"That is curious," Hopford exclaimed, "because when Mrs. Robertson and Michaud came face to face in Dieppe the other day, they apparently did not know each other. A friend of mine, Captain Preston, said so in a letter to Doctor Johnson."

"Not Captain Charles Preston who is going to marry a girl called Yootha Hagerston?" the other detective asked quickly, now speaking for the first time.

"That is the man," Hopford replied. "I served under him during the war, and I know Miss Hagerston too."

The detective glanced across at his female colleague.

"Isn't that a coincidence?" he said.

"Oh, coincidences never surprise me," she answered with a shrug.

"But it points to further collusion," the man said.

"Then I take it," Llanvar put in, "there exists in London at the present time, and has existed for

a year or more, some sort of organization for extorting money in considerable sums from rich and well-known people by means of direct or indirect blackmail?"

"Not only that," the woman answered. "I am in a position to know that some members of the organization have levied blackmail on each other. There is no honor among miscreants of that type. They would blackmail their own parents if they got the chance, and could benefit. Such people deserve life sentences. Yet in spite of the cunning and cleverness of this particular gang I think we are on the right road to tracking them all down now, although they do pretend to belong to the best society, and no doubt have influential friends."

Hopford felt elated as he wandered homeward that night, arm in arm with his host, the mental specialist, Idris Llanvar. Each member of the little gathering had, during the informal conference, contributed some link, or part of a link, to the chain of evidence they were forging between them to justify steps being taken to arrest Jessica and the people whom they now knew beyond doubt to be her accomplices in crime.

The town of Singapore had been mentioned incidentally, and Llanvar had provided some useful data. Angela Robertson and Fobart Robertson her husband, Timothy Macmahon, Julius Stringborg, and his wife Marietta, Aloysius Stapleton, and two or three more had apparently, when living in Shanghai, formed an exclusive little clique concerning

which the strangest of rumors had been rife. The rumor most commonly credited was that the clique was actively interested in the secret exportation of a peculiarly potent drug said to possess several remarkable attributes. To what country or countries they exported it, nobody had been able to discover, but "on good authority" it was declared that high officials in Shanghai, Hong Kong and other important ports were in the habit of receiving heavy bribes not to notice what was happening.

Llanvar himself, he said, had once been indirectly approached by a native acting obviously on the instructions of some European, with a view to the possibility of his benefiting financially if, "as a matter of form," he would sign his name to certain documents which would be brought to him secretly. He had pretended to consent, hoping thereby to discover what was happening, but nothing further had transpired, from which he concluded, he said, that the members of the clique had decided not to trust him.

Hopford and Llanvar sat talking in the latter's sitting-room over a whisky and soda before going to bed. Mostly they discussed the affairs of the evening; but from one subject to another they drifted until presently Hopford said:

"I wonder Johnson has never married, Llanvar. He is such a good fellow, and the sort of man women like, and he must be fairly well off."

For some moments his host remained silent.

"Well, he wouldn't mind my telling you, I think,"

he said at last, "but in point of fact he was badly turned down some years ago by a girl, I think between ourselves he was fortunate not to marry. He was terribly in love with her, though, and it took him a long time to recover from the disappointment; I doubt if he has really recovered from it yet. He told me all about it once, and I think the confidence relieved his mind to some extent. It is bad to brood in complete silence over that sort of thing."

"Was she English?"

"Yes, a Devonshire girl. She broke it off in order to marry a viscount; and three years after the marriage they separated. Whose fault it was of course I don't know, but the girl was a selfish, self-centered little thing, and I think her husband must have been well rid of her."

"Then you knew her?"

"Oh yes, I knew her."

He smiled.

"She set her cap at me once, when she fancied, and I believed, I was coming into a small fortune from my father's sister. But my father's sister took a dislike to me and when she died the money went to some missionary society. Directly the girl heard that, she found she no longer cared for me and turned her attention to Johnson, with whom I was living at the time, and who was already head over ears in love with her."

"That was out East, I suppose?"

"Yes, in Hong Kong, which we have been talking

about so much to-night. I don't think Johnson will ever marry."

"Don't you? I do. In fact I am prepared to wager he will be married within the year."

Llanvar looked at him in astonishment.

"You don't mean that!" he exclaimed. "Why, who is the lady?"

Then it was that Hopford proceeded to tell him about the pretty widow, as he called her, Cora Hartsilver, and what he had noticed while in Jersey. And they were both in Jersey still, he said, and, in his opinion, likely to remain there some time.

"In fact, it would not surprise me at all," he ended, "if Johnson and Mrs. Hartsilver were to become engaged before returning to England. Johnson has not even hinted to me that the widow attracts him, but I have noticed his expression when he speaks of her, and, more than that, I have noticed the way she looks at him when they are together."

CHAPTER XXVI.

SUNSET LOVE.

PERHAPS one of the chief attractions of Jersey is that even during July, August and September, when most seaside resorts in England are so crowded with excursionists that anything in the nature of solitude is out of the question, you may find miles of sea-beach where hardly a human being is in sight. Add to this that the sun shines there usually all day and every day in summer, that the blueness of the sea resembles the Mediterranean, that the landscapes over and seascapes around the whole island are exceptionally beautiful, and that the inhabitants are, for the most part, hospitable and exceedingly polite, and the popularity of Jersey is easily accounted for.

Johnson had meant to stay there only a week or two, but more than a month had elapsed since his arrival and he still tarried. Nor did he express any intention of bringing his visit to a close. He had told his newly-made friends in the Victoria Club that he had now decided to remain "until the weather broke;" but when some days later the weather did break, he hesitated. The reason he gave for altering his mind was that the air suited him. Even if it had not suited him he would probably have remained, however, seeing that he had fallen

deeply in love with the beautiful young widow who had come to him for advice, and that his love was fully reciprocated.

It had all come about in a very curious way, yet neither had as yet ventured to reveal to the other the secret they both cherished. After three days' heavy rain the weather recovered its normal condition—blazing sun and cloudless sky—and then it was that the doctor suggested to Cora Hartsilver that he should drive her in his car right round the coast.

The afternoon was gorgeously fine when they set out from St. Helier, and as they sped rapidly over the picturesque coast-road which leads along Victoria Avenue through Villees Nouaux to Bel Royal, thence past Beaumont with its pretty red-roofed houses nestling in the cliff behind the hamlet, then by Le Haute Station and on towards the old-world village of St. Aubin with streets so steep and narrow that Johnson was forced to slow down to a mile or two an hour, they began to feel that now at last life seemed worth living.

"There is a lovely bay a little farther on," Johnson said as they crept up the steady slope towards Mont Sohier. "I saw it from a boat the other day, and have meant ever since to go there by road. It is called St. Brelade's Bay, and the cliffs behind it are for the most part beautifully wooded. I suggest we should stop there a little while; I will leave the car at the hotel. Would you like to do that?"

They were almost the first words he had spoken since they had set out, and for some moments his companion did not answer. Then she said, and her voice had a curious timbre, as though she were holding herself in check:

"I will do whatever you like; the surroundings here are so exquisite that no matter where we go it will be pleasant. Look at that purple haze hanging like a gauze curtain over the cliffs all round the coast and right along the shore," and she pointed. "Did you ever see anything so perfect? And the endless expanse of white sand with the sun's rays sparkling on it as far as eye can reach, and hardly a soul in sight. I had no idea Jersey was so lovely; had you, Doctor Johnson?"

He murmured some almost inaudible reply, and, turning the corner sharply, slowly drew up at the entrance to a garage flanked on both sides with great bushes of hydrangeas.

"We will leave the car here," he said, "and after tea we can explore some of those woods on the sloping cliffs. Probably from up there the view is even finer."

The hotel, though the holiday season was at its height, they found almost deserted. The hordes of trippers whose presence each had often suffered from during August and September by the sea on the coasts of England, were conspicuous by their absence. The few visitors wandering on the beach were of quite a different type. They were what can most accurately be described as people of refinement.

During tea Johnson and his companion hardly spoke. Some strange barrier seemed suddenly to have risen up between them. Almost in silence they afterwards strolled along the terrace, and a little later turned their steps up a narrow, grass-grown lane which appeared to lead in the direction of the sloping woods they sought.

The lane curved, then turned abruptly to the right. Presently it curved again, describing almost a segment of a circle, then gradually became narrower. The grass, too, was longer as they wandered on. Then the branches of the trees on either side began to meet overhead, and soon they found themselves walking through a tunnel of thick foliage.

And still neither spoke. They walked very slowly now. It was Johnson who at last broke the silence:

"Jersey will always be associated in my mind," he said in a low voice, "with some of the happiest moments of my life—this wonderful afternoon in particular."

"Why wonderful?" Cora asked almost in a whisper, not trusting herself to look into his face.

"Why wonderful?"

Almost unconsciously his arm stole about her, and he drew her, unresisting, closer to him.

"Why wonderful?" he repeated.

They were standing quite still now. His arms encircled her. Her head sank forward on his breast and she felt his face buried in her hair.

On an instant a wild wave of passionate love for him swept over her. It was like the bursting of

some great dam in her heart which for days past she had controlled. Turning, she put her hands behind his head and drew it down until his lips were pressed to hers. For over a minute they remained locked in a close embrace.

"Do you really mean it?" she exclaimed at last in a feverish whisper, disengaging herself from his strong arms. "You are not just flirting with me? You are not doing this just to pass the time away, or because this beautiful spot has intoxicated your brain?"

She paused.

"Can all that is happening be really true," she exclaimed ardently. "Or is it only a beautiful dream from which I shall presently awake?"

"It is no dream, my darling," he murmured, taking her face between his hands and gazing down into her lovely eyes as though they mesmerized him.

"I want you, my dear; I want you dreadfully; you can have no idea how I yearn for you! Yes, I ask you now if you will become my wife, for I know you are the first woman I have ever truly loved."

He bent forward and kissed her again passionately on the lips. As he did so he felt her body quiver.

He had meant to return to the hotel within an hour or two, but more than three hours had passed and still they did not go back. The sun was setting now, and from where they sat the shadow of the trees on a sheltered spot near the summit of the

wooded cliff, a magnificent view of the entire bay unfolded itself beneath them.

But of that both were oblivious. They could see nothing but each other's eyes, hear nothing but each other's voices. The world might have fallen in without their knowing.

The sun, which all day had blistered the scorched earth, had sunk in a halo of gray and purple streaked with seams of gold. Dusk was fading into darkness, and still neither moved. Cora's head rested in his lap. His fingers, buried in her soft hair, toyed gently with it. Again he bent down and kissed her with all the ardor of his soul.

Night had set in when at last they rose to go. Cora felt supremely happy. Her brief married life, when she looked back on it, now seemed to her a nightmare; her future married life, on the contrary held all sorts of hopes. Would she have been as happy with Sir Stephen Lethbridge—the question came unbidden into her thoughts—as she felt she would be with the man she had now accepted?

She dispelled the question unanswered, and at once another took its place. The unsigned letter she had received, the threat it contained, the identity of the writer, what of all that? Her future husband had not even referred to it again. Could he have forgotten it in the ardor of his wooing?

As so often happens between people in close sympathy, the thought, as it came to her, flashed at once into his brain.

"I have been carefully considering," he said sud-

denly, "the matter you came to me about, and that has led indirectly to our engagement. You have nothing now to fear from that, my darling. The scoundrel who sent the letter can do her worst. Let her write to all your friends. Let her tell them what she chooses. If she does, and they talk in consequence, what can it matter to us? It will not affect my love for you, or your love for me, will it? And what else is there that matters? In point of fact, when she reads or hears of our engagement, as undoubtedly she soon will, she will, I suspect, let the matter drop. Or she will write to me, thinking I know nothing."

"Then you still believe, dear, the writer to be a woman?"

"I feel convinced it must be, though, as I told you, she may have a male accomplice. But already I have set in motion the machinery which I hope will lead her unwittingly to reveal herself. We ought to hear something in a week or two."

They were now back at the hotel, and there they dined. Cora was trembling with excitement at all that had occurred. It all seemed so wonderful. That she should, quite by chance, have read in the newspaper of Doctor Johnson's arrival; that the unsigned letter should have come about that time; that she should have thought of asking his advice; that he should have interested himself in the matter; that their friendship should have ripened so quickly into love, and have ended as it had done!

Out in the night the moon was shining brightly.

It lit up the bay with a single streak of silver, which extended far out across the sea to where the lighthouses were winking along the coast. And the atmosphere was as warm as in the tropics.

"Must we go back to St. Helier now?" she inquired in a strained voice, as they rose to go out. "I feel to-night as if I could never sleep again."

"And you need not sleep again," he answered with a smile, taking her hand in his, "at least until you want to. We are returning to St. Helier, but not by the way we came. I said when we came out we would go right round the island, but then I did not know what was going to happen. We will telephone to the friends with whom you are staying, and you can speak to them. You can tell them as little or as much as you like of what has befallen you to-night. And you can say that you do not expect to be home before midnight, or possibly even later. It should be the most delightful drive either of us has ever had."

Slowly the car passed up the narrow lane which led from the hotel. At the top it turned into a wider road which branched off to the left.

The great headlight lit up the road for a hundred yards or more. Increasing speed a little, Johnson made straight for Corbière, where the road turned abruptly to the right. Leaving La Pulente behind them, they traveled rapidly until they reached the village of La Thiebaut, not far from the northern coast. And all the time they traveled they exchanged hardly a word.

The moon had now completely risen, and as they bore round to the right again to meet the road to Ville Bagot, the car suddenly slowed down. It stopped, and the engine became silent.

"Is anything the matter?" Cora inquired anxiously.

No sound of any sort was audible save, in the far distance, the sea washing up the beach.

"Nothing is the matter, my own darling," Johnson murmured passionately, "but I felt that on a night like this——"

And so, in the solitude of that perfect night, they renewed their vows once more. Locked in her lover's arms, Cora felt supremely happy. She felt his burning kisses on her lips and face and neck, on her eyes and on her hair.

"Darling," she whispered back in an ecstasy at last. "I never knew before that any one could be so happy! Oh, how I hope you will never tire of me, that we shall live in this state of bliss right through to the end of our lives! I feel that until now my life has been so aimless. I have led such a butterfly existence. But it will be different in the future, my dearest—oh, so completely different. I mean to do all in my power to make you the happiest man on earth, and then . . ."

Thus she talked, her words of love and passion flowing like a torrent from her lips. For the time all else but their great love was forgotten. Even her fondness for Yootha had passed completely from her mind.

When Johnson had driven her back to the house where she was still on a visit to her friends, and had returned to the Brees Hotel, he found several letters awaiting him which had arrived during the day.

One, he saw, was from Preston, and bore the Dieppe postmark. The other came from England, and the handwriting was Blenkiron's.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AGAINST THE WIND.

GEORGE BLENKIRON wrote in his usual breezy style, and much of the news in his letter interested Johnson greatly, in view of what Hopford and Preston had told him, also in view of his engagement to Cora Hartsilver.

It was a long letter, and Blenkiron mentioned among other items of news that, happening to be in the neighborhood of Uckfield, some days before, curiosity had prompted him to seek out Stapleton's cottage, The Nest, which he knew to be in the vicinity.

"He calls it a 'cottage,'" he wrote, "but in reality it is a good-sized house, approached by a carriage drive about half-a-mile long, and flanked on three sides by woods with thick undergrowth. The house itself lies in a hollow, and you come upon it unexpectedly. My intention was only to have a look at the place, but when I arrived at it so suddenly I concluded that most likely somebody had seen me approaching, so I went up and rang the bell, meaning to inquire if Stapleton were at home.

"Though I rang three times, the only sound of life within was the low growling of a dog; by the 'woolliness' of its growl I judged it to be a bulldog. This rather stirred my curiosity, so I went round

to the back door, and there knocked. Again nobody came; yet I distinctly heard a footstep just inside the door. Finally, I tried to enter, but the door was locked.

"By then my curiosity had become thoroughly aroused, and I determined not to go away until I had seen somebody. I therefore walked away from the house by the road I had come, taking care not to look behind me; then, when I could no longer be seen from the house, I turned into the wood and made my way back among the trees until I reached a spot commanding a view of the front door and carriage drive, but where I myself could not be observed. The only thing I feared was that the dog might presently be let out, when he would, I felt sure, at once discover me.

"After about twenty minutes a smartly-dressed young woman suddenly appeared. She came round from the back of the house, and looked about her as though expecting somebody. A few minutes later I heard the iron gate across the drive open and shut, and rather an old man came towards her. They met in the middle of the drive, kissed most affectionately, and then looked in my direction. You can imagine my astonishment when I recognized the man. It was Alix Stothert of the Metropolitan Secret Agency!

"Neither of them saw me, of course; nor did they suspect they were being watched. A minute later they turned, and went towards the house. Arrived at the front door, Stothert took a key out of his

pocket, unlocked the door and entered, followed by the young woman. The door closed behind them, and I heard it being locked again. I waited about an hour longer to see if anything more would happen, then I went back into the carriage drive, walked boldly up to the house as if I had just arrived, and rang loudly.

"It is an old house with an old-fashioned bell-pull. Again there was no answer, or other sign of life; even the dog did not growl, from which I concluded it had been taken into some inner room. Four times I rang, but the place might have been unoccupied for all the notice that was taken. So then I turned and came away. Strange, wasn't it?

"Of course Stothert may have been there on some ordinary matter of business; but then who was the girl—she was very dainty-looking—and why did nobody come when I rang? I can't help thinking something queer is going on there.

"As I was walking back to Uckfield, a man overtook me, riding slowly on a push bike. About a mile further on I overtook him; he appeared to be repairing a tire. He glanced up at me casually as I passed by, and the moment afterwards called out to inquire if I had a match about me. I went back and gave him one, for which he thanked me with rather unnecessary profusion, I thought, and then he offered me a cigarette, and lit it for me. We exchanged a few words about the weather, and I went on.

"At the railway station, two hours later, I saw

him again. He was on the platform, waiting for the train, but had no bicycle with him then. I passed him twice, but he appeared not to recognize me, so I did not speak to him. When I alighted at Waterloo I happened to notice him behind me on the platform, still without his bicycle; and when I alighted from a taxi at Cox's Hotel, in Jermyn Street, where I am staying, to my astonishment he was standing on the curb, about a hundred yards along the street—I could see only his profile, but there could be no mistaking him as he stood there staring up at a house on the opposite side of the street. Then, for the first time, the thought struck me that he must be shadowing me. I have not seen him since, but I should recognize him at once if I met him."

In another part of the letter Blenkiron told Johnson he had heard about Jessica's success at the tables at Dieppe, but he said nothing about Yootha. He asked Johnson, however, if he had happened to come across Harry Hopford, who he had been told had gone to Jersey. If he should meet him, he ended, would he remember to ask him to write at once, as he wished to communicate with him on a matter of importance.

Johnson refolded the letter, then opened the letter from Preston.

Preston's communication was brief. There was no reference to his engagement, nor to Yootha. He spoke of Jessica and her friends, however, and again mentioned their having broken the bank.

"I am sick of this place," he remarked towards the end of the letter. "The town is crawling with the most impossible people—I can't think who they are or where they come from; holiday-makers, of course. The chief attraction is naturally the Casino, where these holiday folk swarm at night and seem to delight in showing how foolishly they can squander quite a lot of money. Our countrymen and women show up badly in a place like this, and give the French a poor opinion of the British race. I shall probably return to London in a day or two, but my movements will depend to some extent on circumstances."

"On circumstances," Johnson said aloud, as he finished reading the letter. "Now, I wonder what those circumstances are? It is not like Preston to conceal his reasons. He is worried about something, I am sure. The tone of his letter shows it, and I can read between the lines."

He appeared to ponder for a minute.

"Strange," he said at last. "I was under the impression that Yootha Hagerston was still in Dieppe, and yet he makes no mention of her."

He smiled.

"I wonder if they have quarrelled, or if——"

Suddenly his thoughts reverted to Cora; then to the contents of Blenkiron's letter; then to the anonymous letter Cora had received, and finally once more to Alix Stothert.

"Of course," he said reflectively, "that girl Stothert kissed so affectionately in the carriage drive may have been his daughter, and yet——"

"And he said the dog that growled sounded like a bulldog. La Planta has one, a brindle. I wish the dog at Stapleton's house had been let out to pursue George, then he would have known its color!"

He smiled at the thought.

"But, after all," his train of thought ran on, "why should La Planta's dog have been in Stapleton's house? Plenty of people own bulldogs; and for that matter it may not have been a bulldog."

He had been singularly accurate in his conjecture that Charlie Preston was worried. Indeed he was more than worried. At the time of writing he had felt almost in despair at the extraordinary change that had suddenly come over Yootha. From the night of her great success at the tables she had become a slave to roulette. She played now with Jessica during the afternoons as well as at night, and not infrequently in the morning too. She could talk and think of nothing but roulette and *petits chevaux*. At the moment her ambition was to evolve a system by which she could never lose—a chimera pursued by many votaries of the game, and invariably disastrous in the end.

Preston had made every endeavor to dissuade her from continuing to play. He had assured her that in the long run she must infallibly lose all she had won, and more; but when day after day went by and she almost always came out a winner in the end, she felt she could afford to disregard his advice, well-meant though she knew it to be.

But the worst had happened when one day after she had won a good deal and Preston had again spoken to her, and had finished by trying for the twentieth time to induce her to break her friendship with Jessica, she had suddenly turned upon him, practically told him to mind his own business, and ended by saying that if she were going to break any friendship it would be her friendship with him and not with Jessica.

He had gone out that evening feeling miserable, though instinctively knowing that in the end she must come back to him. Yes, in the end, but how long, he asked himself, would the end be in coming? Jessica seemed to have hypnotized her, to be able now to make her do her bidding in any way she chose. Several times he had seen her and her two undesirable friends and Yootha all seated together round a table on the terrace of the hotel, smoking cigarettes and drinking what looked like whisky and soda in full view of everybody passing.

Again and again he had blamed himself for having allowed her to adopt Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson as her chaperone. Chaperone! Why, he said mentally, a hundred times safer she would have been with no chaperone than with that dissolute woman to look after her, and her *dévergondé* companions.

Two nights later, on returning to the hotel, he was handed a note by the clerk in the office. Recognizing Yootha's handwriting on the envelope, he took the note up to his bedroom to read it in private. It was short, and ran as follows:

"DEAR CHARLIE,—This is just to tell you that I am leaving here to-morrow with Jessica and her friends. We are going to Monte first, then probably we shall stay in Paris a little while, and after that we shall return to London, when I shall hope to see you. I don't want to quarrel with you, dear. Indeed I don't, and I am dreadfully sorry you should misjudge Jessica in the way you do. She is such a good friend to me now, and I hope we shall continue to be friends. But most of all I wish you would overcome your prejudices against her, so that we might all be friends together. I hate making you unhappy, as I feel I am doing, but truly I think you are unintentionally to blame. Lots of love, my dear.

"YOOHA."

"Curse the woman!" he exclaimed aloud, "and the abominable way she has taught Yootha to gamble. Well, I suppose I can do nothing at the moment. I only hope to heaven that at Monte the whole lot will lose heavily, so heavily that Yootha at any rate will be brought to her senses once and for all. Meanwhile I must try to hurry on our wedding."

Yootha went off early next day without seeing him or even leaving a note to wish him good-by. A week later he heard indirectly that at the tables in Monte Carlo the four were still winning. A report reached the Royal Hotel in Dieppe that they had won a fabulous sum. It was quite extraordinary, everybody said. Never within the memory of the oldest *habitués* of the Dieppe Casino had players had such a run of luck. And its consistency was

that they all played "anyhow," or seemed to. On the few occasions when they had experimented with some system, they had lost heavily—so it was said.

"Yootha, my darling," Jessica remarked casually to her one night towards the end of a champagne supper at which all sorts of people were present, for their luck had brought them a whole host of "friends," "what has become of your knight-errant—or is he your knight-errant no longer? I should be delighted if I heard you had thrown him over, or even that he had thrown you over. Have you heard from him lately?"

"Not very lately," Yootha replied quickly, with a slight frown which Jessica did not fail to notice. "He has gone back to London, I believe."

"‘You believe.’ That doesn't sound promising, does it?" and she laughed in her deep voice, though it was not a pleasant laugh. "When a man is engaged to be married, especially to such a charming girl—a girl any man ought to be proud to speak to, let alone be engaged to—it isn't very considerate of him to leave her in the lurch in the way Captain Preston left you. And if he neglects you now, don't you think he's pretty sure to begin neglecting you when you have been married a little while?"

"Oh, I don't know," Yootha answered awkwardly. "Men are queer animals. I have always said so. At one time I made up my mind never to marry."

"But changed it directly you had the privilege of meeting Captain Preston."

She spoke almost with a sneer.

"Not directly," the girl said weakly, conscious

that, had she drunk less champagne and had all her wits about her, she would have said something different, would have stood up for her lover.

Jessica edged a little closer to her.

"Why not give him up?" she murmured so that nobody but Yootha could hear. "He has not treated you well; he has not played the game, has he now? Just think—he is supposed to be your lover, yet after swearing, as I am sure he has done, he has never in his life before met any woman to approach you, he leaves you alone, lets you go roaming about the Continent with two men and a woman he intensely dislikes, and himself calmly returns to England without even wishing you good-bye! Does that look like true love, dear? Does it look like love at all? Supposing a man you knew nothing about were going to marry some friend of yours, what would you think, what would you say, if all at once he treated her like this? Take my advice, Yootha," she went on, speaking lower still, "give him up. Write to him to-morrow; come up to my room and write to him at once; saying that in view of all that has happened you have decided to break off your engagement. He won't break his heart—break his heart, I should think not!—and believe me, you will one day thank me for having saved you from marrying a man who doesn't love you."

As she stopped speaking she refilled the girl's glass with champagne.

"And now listen to me," she ended under her breath. "I have something serious to say to you."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

NUMBER FIFTEEN.

WHEN Yootha awoke next morning, her head was aching badly. She had only a confused recollection of the events of the previous night, and the more she tried to remember exactly what had happened, the greater the tangle became.

Her blinds were down and the room was still almost in darkness, as she had not yet been called. For about an hour she remained in a sort of disturbed half-sleep; then gradually she began to wonder what the time could be. Through the open windows the sound of traffic came to her, which made her think it must be late. She turned to look at her watch. It had stopped at four in the morning.

She felt under her pillow for the electric bell push, and some minutes later one of the hotel maids entered.

"What time is it?" Yootha asked.

"Close on one o'clock, miss."

"One o'clock! But why was I not called? Why was my cup of tea not brought?"

"I will inquire, miss," and the maid left the room, closing the door behind her.

Soon she returned. She said that before Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson had left she had said that Miss Hagerston was very tired and must not be disturbed.

"How do you mean, before she left?" Yootha inquired. "Where has she gone?"

"I have no idea, miss. She left the hotel this morning with her maid, and the two gentlemen who were with her have gone too."

"You mean gone away? Gone, with their luggage?"

"Yes, miss."

Yootha started up in bed.

"But this is extraordinary!" she exclaimed. "They never said a word yesterday about leaving. Has no message been left for me?"

"No, miss. I made that inquiry."

A whole flood of thoughts, doubts, suspicions, surged through the girl's brain. Oh, if only she could remember exactly what had happened on the previous night! But the harder she tried to concentrate her thoughts, the more impossible she found it to remember anything. She could recollect playing and winning in the Casino during the afternoon and evening; after that her mind was a blank. She could not recollect even where she had had supper, or with whom, or if she had had supper at all!

Then, all at once, her heart seemed to stop beating. Ever since the night she and Jessica and her friends had together broken the bank at Dieppe, Jessica had been acting as her banker. That is to say she had suggested that in order to save Yootha trouble—so she put it—she would advance her money to play with, as much as she might want,

and, in return, take charge of the girl's winnings. Every morning she had come to Yootha and told her the exact sum she held belonging to her, and out of it she had handed Yootha whatever sum she asked for. But there had been no record or acknowledgment, or aught else in writing. Yootha had placed implicit confidence in her friend and now——

She saw it all, and her mouth went suddenly dry. Jessica had left her, taking with her the whole of the very considerable sum she, Yootha, had won during the past weeks. Had she not been so lucky, Jessica and her friends would no doubt have left her long before. Now, probably, they had come to the conclusion enough money had been won by her to make it worth their while to decamp with it. And what could she do? If she tried to claim it Jessica would, of course, say she knew nothing whatever about it, and perhaps declare her to be suffering from a delusion.

Breakfast was brought to her room, but she could not touch it. Then suddenly a feeling of terrible loneliness came over her. She realized she was alone in Monte Carlo, where she knew nobody but people to whom Jessica had introduced her, and whom she had no wish to meet again. True, she had money enough to pay her fare home, but had she enough to pay the bill at this very expensive hotel where she had been staying already a fortnight? To offer the manager a cheque might, she felt, lead to unpleasantness should he refuse to accept it.

She dressed as quickly as she could, and went out into the town. The sun was shining brightly, and the band playing, and crowds of well-dressed men and women seemed to be everywhere. She was conscious, as she wandered aimlessly through the beautiful gardens of the Casino, of attracting attention and admiration.

Presently her gaze rested on the entrance to the Casino. A stream of people was passing in and out. The band was playing a jazz which she loved, and the music stirred her pulse. For the moment the thought of her distress rested less heavily on her mind. And then, all at once, the gambling fever, which had temporarily subsided, began to reassert itself. Play would be in full swing now, she reflected. She pictured the crowd grouped around the roulette. She heard the croupier's bored voice droning "*Faites vos jeux*," and "*Rien n'va plus*," and the rattle of the little ball as it spun merrily round in the revolving well. Then she saw the numbers slowing down, saw them stop, and heard the croupier calling: "*Le numero quinze!*"

She opened her vanity bag, pulled out the money it contained, and proceeded to count it carefully. It was all the ready money she possessed. Certainly it did not amount to enough to settle her hotel bill for the past fortnight, and the bill was bound to be presented soon. She had come to look upon winning at the tables as a matter of daily routine. Also, she yearned to play again. The Casino with its heated atmosphere, its scented women, its piles of notes

and its chink of gold, seemed to be calling to her, beckoning her to come and fill her depleted coffers at its generous fount of wealth, especially now that she needed money. For a brief moment she thought of Preston, and of their last meeting, and of his earnest warning. Then, dispelling the disagreeable reflection, she stuffed her money back into her bag, shut it with a snap, rose, and walked quickly in the direction of the famous Temple of Mammon.

She had little difficulty in securing a seat. For a minute or two she watched the play. Then she backed the number she had thought of while in the gardens—*le numero quinze*.

It came up.

She backed it again, and once more swept in her winnings. Then she started playing *en plein*, recklessly and with big stakes, as she had been in the habit of doing. But her luck had suddenly changed. Again and again she lost. She doubled, and trebled, and quadrupled her stakes.

But still she lost.

In less than half an hour she had only a single louis left, and, rising abruptly, she walked out of the *salon* like a woman in a dream.

A louis! Of what use was that? She went back to her hotel, and locked herself in her room. Her brain felt on fire. She thought she was going mad. She wanted to cry, but could not.

For an hour she lay on her bed, suffering mental agony. Then with an effort she got up, and sent off a telegram.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A MESSAGE FROM YOOTHATH.

It was seven in the morning when Preston was awakened by his servant, Tom, and handed a telegram which had just arrived.

Before he opened it he guessed it must be from Yootha. It ran as follows:

"I am in great trouble. Can you possibly come to me? I am alone here and ill in bed. Jessica and the others have left Monte Carlo. Do please telegraph a reply as soon as this reaches you."

Preston was not a man to deliberate. He always made up his mind at once, and acted without hesitation.

"Is the messenger waiting?" he asked Tom, who still stood at his bedside.

"Yes, sir."

"Then give me a foreign telegram form."

Swiftly he scribbled the answer.

"Give that to the boy," he said, "and sixpence for himself, and tell him to get back to the post office as quickly as he can. Then come back to me."

In a moment the man returned.

"Pack my suit-case, Tom. I am going to Monte Carlo at once."

"For how long, sir?"

"Pack enough for a fortnight."

He traveled through to the Riviera without stopping in Paris, and drove direct to the Hotel X. Upon inquiring for Yootha he was told that the doctor was with her. The hotel manager looked grave when Preston inquired how ill she had been.

A moment later the door opened, and a solemn-faced gentleman of patriarchal aspect entered. The manager at once introduced him to Preston, and explained who Preston was.

"She has dropped off to sleep at last," the doctor said. "I had to give her a mild narcotic. She has been eagerly awaiting your arrival since she received your wire, and I believe your presence will do her more good than anything else. She appears to be suffering chiefly from shock—a mental shock of some sort. Her nerves are greatly upset."

When some hours later Yootha awoke, her gaze rested upon her lover seated beside her bed. For a moment she fancied she must still be dreaming. Then, with a glad cry, she sat up and stretched her arms out to him.

"Oh, my darling," she cried, "how good of you to have come to me! Even when I got your telegram I feared that something might detain you. I have had a terrible time since last we met—terrible!"

For a minute they remained locked in each other's arms, the happiest moments they had spent since that never-to-be-forgotten evening under the shadow of the Sugarloaf Mountain in Monmouthshire. And

then, perhaps for the first time, Yootha realized to the full the joy of being truly loved by a man on whose loyalty and steadfastness she knew she could implicitly depend.

Yootha's recovery was rapid, and in the following week Preston decided to take her to Paris, which she was anxious to visit, never having been there.

"You had better telegraph to your aunt and ask if she can meet us there, as you say she is well again," he said. "It wouldn't do for us to stay there alone, as long as conventions have to be considered," and he smiled cynically. "Which reminds me that Harry Hopford is in Paris—I had a letter from him yesterday. I am sure he will be glad to see you."

And so, some days later, they arrived at the Hôtel Bristol, where they found Yootha's aunt awaiting them. She was a pleasant, middle-aged woman with intelligent eyes and a sense of humor, and she greeted them effusively.

"You don't hesitate to make use of me when I am in health," she said laughingly to her niece. "I had not the least wish to come to Paris, but now I am very glad I have come. Yes, I am well again, but I don't think you look as if Monte Carlo and its excitement had agreed with you. By the way, a delightful young man called here yesterday to ask if you had arrived. He was so pleasant to talk to that I persuaded him to stay to lunch. He seemed to think a lot of you. His name is Hopford."

"Harry Hopford! A capital lad. I am glad you

met him. He served under me in France and was quite a good soldier."

"He told me he had served under you. He wants you to meet him at an address in Clichy at nine to-morrow night. I have the address somewhere."

"A bit of luck for me, your coming to Paris," Hopford said when they met on the following night. "I particularly wanted to see you, Preston. My inquiries and those of these friends of mine," he had just introduced to Preston the two Paris detectives, his friend on *Le Matin*, and Johnson's friend Idris Llanvar, "have succeeded in making some astonishing discoveries concerning Jessica and her friends, and now I am on the way to tracking Alix Stothert to his lair."

"Alix Stothert!" Preston exclaimed. "What has he to do with it?"

"A good deal, apparently. To begin with, he appears to be a friend of Stapleton's, for a friend of mine in London has, at my request, been watching Stapleton's house near Uckfield, called The Nest. Stothert goes there frequently, it seems; my friend believes he calls there for letters. And the other day some fellow arrived there, knocked and rang, and then, getting no answer, went and hid in the undergrowth in the wood close by, and remained watching the house. While he was watching, Stothert arrived and was met by a girl who, my friend says, is employed by Stothert secretly, and the two went into the house. When the fellow who had lain concealed in the wood—and been himself

watched by my friend—went back to Uckfield, my friend followed him on a bicycle, and finally shadowed him back to London and to an hotel—Cox's in Jermyn Street. But, though afterwards he made inquiries at the hotel, he was unable to find out who the fellow was."

"George Blenkiron, when in town, generally stays at Cox's," Preston said reflectively.

"Does he? Then he may know who the man is, and his name. I'll write to him to-morrow. It is such a small hotel."

Hopford had also a good deal to say about Mrs. Timothy Macmahon and her intimacy with the late Lord Froissart; about Marietta Stringborg and her husband; about Fobart Robertson, whose whereabouts, he said, he was likely soon to discover; and about Alphonse Michaud, proprietor of the Metropolitan Secret Agency at the house with the bronze face. One important fact he had already established—Michaud was intimately acquainted with Jessica and Stapleton. Yet at the Royal Hotel in Dieppe, Preston had told him, Jessica, Stapleton and La Planta had openly stated that they knew Michaud only by name.

"Which confirms the suspicion I have for some time entertained," Hopford went on, "that Jessica and her friends are in some way associated with the house with the bronze face."

"There I can't agree with you," Preston said. "In view of all that has happened, such a thing seems to me incredible. Why, we used to consult the

Secret Agency concerning Jessica and her past history, don't you remember? And they found out for us several things about her."

"Several things, yes, but not one of the things they 'found out' was of importance. It is the Agency's business, to my belief, to hunt with the hounds and run with the hare, and they do it successfully. Surely you recollect Mrs. Hartsilver's telling us how she and Miss Hagerston had been shown by Stothert what he declared to be the actual pearl necklace belonging to Marietta Stringborg, and saying the necklace stolen from her at the Albert Hall ball and afterwards found in Miss Hagerston's possession, was made of imitation pearls? Well, I can prove that on that occasion, as well as at other times, Stothert intentionally lied."

"Then what is your theory?"

"That in some way, yet to be discovered, Jessica and her gang—for they are a gang—and the Metropolitan Secret Agency, are playing each other's game and have played it for a long time. Incidentally I have found out, too, that La Planta once represented an insurance company in Amsterdam, of which Lord Froissart was chairman or director, and that——"

"Forgive my interrupting you, Hopford," Preston cut in, "but what you say reminds me that I too was told, by a Major Guysburg I met in Dieppe. He is a man you ought to meet; he was leaving for America when we parted, but ought soon to be back, and he promised to look me up in town on his

return. And he can tell you a lot about Alphonse Michaud, who, he assured me, at one time ran a most disreputable haunt in Amsterdam."

Hopford produced his notebook.

"How do you spell the major's name?" he asked quickly, and Preston told him.

"And where does he stay when in town?"

"At Morley's Hotel, I believe," and Hopford wrote that down too.

"Now for heaven's sake don't say 'how small the world is,' Preston," Hopford observed lightly as he replaced his notebook in his pocket, "because that is a platitude which makes me see red. I must see Guysburg directly he arrives in London. Certainly we are getting on. I suppose Guysburg didn't speak about a diamond robbery in Amsterdam from a merchant living in the Kalverstraat, which took place some years ago? The thief was never caught."

Preston laughed.

"The very thing he did tell me," he answered. "The stones had been insured by Michaud, to whom the insurance money was paid under protest because the idea had got about that Michaud himself, or some person employed by him, had stolen them."

Hopford turned to the French woman-detective, and raised his eyebrows.

"You hear that?" he said to her in French. "Isn't it strange how small—no, I won't say it! Mademoiselle was employed," he addressed Preston again, "on that very case in Amsterdam, and feels as convinced to-day as she did then that Michaud,

aided by La Planta, spirited away the stones. Yet nothing could be proved. There were not even sufficient clues to justify the arrest of either of the two men. By the way, I am trying to get made-moiselle to return to London with me, and she hopes she will be able to. Also I have forgotten to tell you that Idris Llanvar is a famous mental specialist practicing here in Paris—isn't that so, Llanvar? Years ago he was Johnson's *locum tenens* in Shanghai, when Johnson practiced in Hong Kong. It was Johnson who kindly gave me an introduction to him, when he and I met in Jersey. Aren't you glad, Preston, that Johnson is going to marry Mrs. Hartsilver? I think she is such a charming woman, though I don't know her very well. But I met the late Henry Hartsilver once or twice—a typical profiteer, and, I thought, a most offensive person. She was well rid of him. Did you know Sir Stephen Lethbridge?"

Preston looked at Hopford oddly.

"What makes you suddenly ask that?" he said. "What was your train of thought?"

"I had no train of thought, so far as I am aware," Hopford replied. "But there is a vague rumor in London that someone, a woman, a friend of Stothert's, holds certain letters written by Mrs. Hartsilver to Sir Stephen Lethbridge, or by Sir Stephen to her, and that this woman is trying to sell them to Mrs. Hartsilver. Incidentally, Preston, your name has been whispered in relation to the affair, which leads me to suspect that Mistress Jessica may

not be wholly unassociated with this latest attempt at blackmail. Llanvar had a letter from Johnson yesterday, who is still in Jersey, and in it he alluded to the rumor, but in very guarded language."

Preston did not answer. His lips were tightly closed. Then, as if to distract attention from what Hopford had just said, he produced his cigar case and passed it round.

* * * * *

Yootha was very anxious to see, as she put it, "everything in Paris worth seeing," from the Bastille to the Ambassadeurs and the Cascade, and from the Louvre to the Palais de Versailles, so during the next few days Preston devoted himself to her entirely. The art galleries in particular appealed to her, also the Quartier Latin with its queer little streets of cobble stones and its stuffy but picturesque old-world houses of which she had so often heard. Exhibitions like the Grand Guignol and the Café de la Mort, on the other hand, she detested.

Hopford and Llanvar had dined with them once, and afterwards Hopford's friend on *Le Matin* had piloted them all to various interesting night-haunts of which English folk visiting Paris for the most part know nothing. He had also taken them into curious caverns below the Rue de la Harpe and streets in its vicinity, and shown them the houses there propped up from below with enormous wooden beams where the arches built over those old quarries have given way.

"But how come there to be quarries here at all?" Yootha had asked in surprise.

The representative of *Le Matin* had evidently expected the question, for at once he had entered into a long explanation about how, when Paris was first built, stones for building purposes had been quarried out in the immediate neighborhood; how the City had gradually reached the edge of those quarries, and how, in order to be able to continue to extend the City, it had been necessary to arch the quarries over and then erect buildings on the arches themselves.

"Of course the good folk who live in those houses above our heads," he laughed as he pointed upward, "have no idea that their houses are propped up from below, and some day they may get the surprise of their lives by finding themselves and their houses suddenly swallowed up in the bowels of the earth."

It was late when finally they had all separated. Then Hopford, on arriving at Rue des Petits Champs, had found a blue telegram awaiting him. It came from his chief, who said Hopford must return at once.

"I have most important news for you," the message had ended.

CHAPTER XXX.

BLENKIRON'S NARRATIVE.

LONDON was now almost full again, after its two months of social stagnation, for October was close at hand. Already announcements were appearing in the newspapers of balls and dances, receptions and dinner parties, and other forms of entertainment with which people with money to spend and no work to do endeavor to kill time. And among the social receptions largely "featured" was one to be given by Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson at her house in Cavendish Place in the third week in October.

Johnson and Mrs. Hartsilver were back in town, so were Captain Preston and Yootha Hagerston, and George Blenkiron was staying at Cox's Hotel, but none of the five had been invited to Jessica's reception. The leading London newspapers had been asked to send representatives, however, and at his request Harry Hopford had been detailed by his chief to attend.

Among the visitors at Morley's Hotel, in Trafalgar Square, was a dark man, obviously a foreigner, with black, rather oily hair and a carefully waxed moustache, a florid complexion and a tendency to obesity. Hopford noticed his name in the visitors' book when he went to inquire for Major Guysburg who, Preston had told him, had just arrived there

from America. The foreigner's name was Alphonse Michaud.

"Major Guysburg is dining out," Hopford was told.

He lit a cigarette, paused in the hall for a moment, then decided to look up Blenkiron, whom he had not seen since his return to town, but who was staying at Cox's Hotel in Jermyn Street. On his way he called at a flat in Ryder Street, and found a friend of his at home and hard at work writing. It was the friend who had, at his request, watched Stapleton's "cottage," The Nest, near Uckfield, while he, Hopford, had been in Paris.

"I am on my way to see a friend at Cox's Hotel," Hopford said, when the two had conversed for some moments, "quite a good fellow, name of Blenkiron. Would you care to come along? You might run across the person you shadowed from The Nest to Cox's that day, you never know."

Blenkiron was in, Hopford was told, and a messenger took his card. A few minutes afterwards he was asked "please to come up."

"'Evening, Blenkiron," he said, as he was shown in. "Hope I am not disturbing you, eh? Tell me if I am, and I'll go away. I have brought a friend I should like to introduce," and he stepped aside to let his friend advance.

Silence followed. In evident astonishment Hopford's friend and Blenkiron stared at each other.

"Haven't we met before?" the latter said at last. "Surely on the road from The Nest to Uckfield——"

The other smiled.

"Yes," he replied. "And I followed you back to town, and to this hotel. Afterwards I tried to find out your name, and who you were, but failed. I hope you will forgive me, Mr. Blinkiron; but I should like you to know I followed you at Hopford's request."

The three burst out laughing.

"So you, Blinkiron," Hopford exclaimed, "are the rascal whose identity has so puzzled us! Really, this is amusing."

Whisky was produced, and soon all three were on the best of terms.

"Have you heard the latest about the house with the bronze face?" Blinkiron asked presently.

"No, what?" Hopford answered eagerly.

"Alix Stothert, Camille Lenoir, and a girl of quite good family, and well-known in Society—I am not at liberty to tell you her name—and several others were arrested there about six o'clock this evening for being accomplices in attempted blackmail. In connection with the blackmail charge any number of people we know are likely to be involved. The names of three you will, I expect, guess at once."

"J. and Co."

Blinkiron nodded.

"By Jove, how splendid!" Hopford exclaimed. "Who told you all this, George?"

"The Commissioner of Police himself, so the information is accurate enough."

Hopford sprang to his feet.

"May I use your telephone?" he asked, as he walked quickly towards the door. "Come and stand by me and I'll dictate the whole story through right away!"

"Hopford, sit down!" Blenkiron shouted imperatively, pointing to the chair from which the lad had just risen. "Not a word of what I have told you is to appear in the press until I authorize it. Not a word! Do you understand?"

"But the other papers will get it," Hopford exclaimed, with his hand on the door handle.

"They won't. That I promise you. The Commissioner of Police, an intimate friend of mine, told me while I was dining with him to-night that the whole affair is to be kept out of the papers until the entire gang has been arrested. If you print a line now you will defeat the ends of justice by warning the unarrested accomplices, and so, probably, enabling them to escape. I mean what I say, Hopford. Preston, Miss Hagerston, Johnson and Mrs. Hartsilver will be here soon—I telephoned asking them to come as I had, I said, something important to tell them. There will be supper, so you and your friend had better stay."

Hopford reflected.

"Have you room for yet one more at supper?" he asked suddenly. "Major Guysburg, a friend of Preston's, is at Morley's—just come from America. He knows a lot about a man, Alphonse Michaud, who is the mainspring of the Metropolitan Secret Agency, and is also at Morley's. I have not yet met Guysburg, but Preston has explained to him

who I am, and the major is greatly interested in the movements of J.'s gang. He should, in fact, be able to throw further light on some of the curious happenings of the last two years."

"Then by all means ring him up and ask him to come along," Blinkiron answered. "But you are mistaken about Michaud's being at Morley's, Hopford, because he was one of those arrested this evening at the house with the bronze face."

"Michaud arrested? Good again! But what was he arrested for?"

"Attempted blackmail—same as the others. But in Michaud's case there is a second charge. Michaud, the Commissioner tells me, turns out to be a regular importer, on a big scale, of a remarkable drug you have already heard about, which is made and only procurable in Shanghai, Canton, and Hankau. The secret of this drug belongs to one man—a Chinaman.

"Now, sixteen years ago Michaud served a sentence of five years' imprisonment in a French penitentiary for attempted blackmail; became, on his release, a greater scoundrel than ever, and finally succeeded in becoming naturalized as an Englishman. Then he went out to the East, set up in business in Canton, and eventually scraped acquaintance with a Shanghai wine merchant named Lucius Stringborg, who introduced him to Fobart Robertson, Timothy Macmahon, Levi Schomberg, Alix Stothert, Stapleton, and several others, including, of course, Angela Robertson.

"Months passed, and then one day Michaud

turned up in London again. None suspected, however, that he was now engaged in secretly importing the strange drug, for which he soon found a ready sale at a colossal profit. Some of the properties of the drug you already know, but it has other properties. Then, after a while he started systematically blackmailing many of his clients, for to be in possession of the drug, without authority, is in England a criminal offense. Not content with that, however, he now decided, in order to be able to extend his operations, to take into his confidence one or two of his friends. Among those friends were Marietta Stringborg and her husband, Angela Robertson and Timothy Macmahon. Those four formed the nucleus of a little gang of criminals which has since increased until——”

The arrival of Preston and Yootha Hagerston, followed almost immediately by Johnson and Cora Hartsilver, put an end to Blenkiron's narrative. All were now greatly excited, and eager for information concerning the house with the bronze face and what had happened there; so that when Major Guysburg was announced he found himself ushered into a room where everybody seemed to be talking at once.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CONCLUSION.

THE two-column article which appeared in only one London morning newspaper created a profound sensation. Quoted in part in the evening newspapers throughout the country, it became the principal topic of conversation in the clubs and in the streets, but in particular in social circles over the whole of the United Kingdom.

That the most important secret information agency in London, an organization which had come to be looked upon as the most enterprising and trustworthy there had ever been in the Metropolis, and which half the peerage, to say nothing of the ordinary aristocracy, had at one time and another consulted in confidence, should suddenly be discovered to be nothing more than the headquarters of a nest of rogues and blackmailers, dealt Society a terrible blow.

The blow was all the harder because clients of the so-called Metropolitan Secret Agency knew they had poured into the ears of the benevolent-looking old man who called himself Alix Stothert, secrets about themselves, their relatives, and their friends, which they would not for untold gold have related had they dreamed such secrets might ever be revealed. And now, to their horror, it seemed that

at least a dozen well-known Society people, or rather people well-known in Society and believed to be the "soul of honor," were, and had been all the time, active members of the "Agency Gang," as it was now termed, prominent among them being Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson, Aloysius Stapleton, handsome young Archie La Planta, and the rich retired tradesman and his wife, Lucius and Marietta Stringborg, to name only a few.

No wonder the Metropolitan Secret Agency had always known so much about the intimate affairs of everybody in London who "mattered," and about the secret concerns of rich county folk throughout the country! The knowledge possessed by the notorious Bertha Trost of Clifford Street, who during the war had been quietly pushed out of the country as an "undesirable alien" had been insignificant by comparison, people said. And the Agency's "methods of procedure" had been extremely simple. One of their plans had consisted in worming out of useful clients as much private information as possible of a compromising nature, not only about themselves, but about their acquaintances and friends, piecing it all together, and then, at a later date, instructing some accomplice to approach or write anonymously to the prospective victims, threatening them with public exposure if they refused to pay heavily for secrecy. And so cleverly was this always done that the Agency invariably safeguarded itself against risk of discovery.

Another method of procedure, equally effective,

consisted in selling secretly, at an enormous profit, the strange Chinese drug smuggled into the country by Alphonse Michaud, and accomplices would then threaten with exposure persons having it in their possession.

In addition to this, Michaud and other members of the Agency Gang would administer the drug in a particular way themselves, so that it deadened their victims' memory from a time prior to the period of unconsciousness which it produced. It was, the newspaper article declared, a most extraordinary compound, and, being colorless and devoid of all smell, could be administered without arousing the least suspicion of its presence. For which reasons, no doubt, some members of the gang had gone so far as to dope other members with it, when they saw that by doing so they could themselves benefit.

That had happened, it seemed, on the occasion when Archie La Planta had been called out of the box at the Alhambra whilst attending a performance of the Russian Ballet. On that night he had met a friend in the foyer, a member of the gang, who had suggested his joining him in a drink in his rooms, which were close by, in Charing Cross Road. La Planta, of course, all unsuspecting, had walked across to his friend's rooms, yet when he had recovered consciousness in his own chambers in Albany, all recollection of his having gone to those rooms in Charing Cross Road and afterwards being conducted back to his own chambers by his "friend," had completely faded from his memory.

And the reason he had been doped that night and in that way—this the man who had doped him confessed afterwards under cross-examination—had been to keep him away from Mrs. Mervyn-Robertson's supper party, a few hours later at her own house, where the same ruse had been employed by the same man, with a woman accomplice, who unseen had then taken from her the key of her safe, which they had then rifled, taking not only the valuables it contained, but inadvertently a packet of letters which proved to be the letters Cora Hartsilver had written to Sir Stephen Lethbridge, and those he had written to her. These documents Jessica had obtained some time before, by bribery, from servants dismissed by Cora and by Sir Stephen for inefficiency, and she had been holding them with a view to using them some day as levers to extort money from Cora; but the woman who had stolen them from the safe had taken that step herself and sent Cora the anonymous letter which had reached her when in Jersey.

And all through it was the same. To right and left clients of the house with the bronze face and intimate friends of Jessica, of Stapleton, of La Planta's, of Mrs. Stringborg and her husband, and of other members of the Agency Gang, had been secretly pilloried and made to pay, while from time to time members of the gang had themselves been victimized by one or other of their own traitorous accomplices, generally through the medium of the Chinese drug. Levi Schomberg, though not a member, had by acci-

dent been made aware of the existence of the gang, its ramifications and its methods, a client to whom he had once advanced a considerable sum having promised to reveal what he called "the whole organization of an extraordinary secret society of criminals operating in this country and on the Continent" if Levi would cancel a portion of the debt. This the moneylender had, after some demur, agreed to do, with the result that afterwards he had been himself able to extort money from Jessica and Stapleton, and other members, under threats of exposure, in precisely the same way that they levied blackmail on their victims.

"And La Planta," Hopford said, as he and others were talking the case over in the reporters' room some time after his article had appeared. "La Planta admits that he drugged Levi Schomberg in the box at the Albert Hall on the night of the ball, though he swears it was not his intention to poison him. Either he mistook the dose he administered in the whisky and soda, he says, or else Levi must have had a weak heart—Doctor Johnson will probably have something to say about that. La Planta declares, too, that he gave the drug on the advice of Stapleton, who handed him the actual dose, saying it was the right amount. Whether it was or not, I suppose we shall never know, though Stapleton has yet to be cross-examined. And another thing we shall probably never know is why Levi Schomberg disliked Mrs. Hartsilver so intensely. He never missed an opportunity of maligning her when her back was

turned. Can he at one time or another have tried to extort money from her, and failed? Or have tried to make love to her, and been turned down? Or can he have had some reason for fearing her?"

"Talking of that, Hopford," his colleague said, after a pause, "do you remember the night you stood up so stoutly for Mrs. Hartsilver, the night I told you that you must be biased in her favor because you knew her socially? What, after all, was the truth about those rumors concerning her and concerning Captain Preston? Did you ever find out? I tried to, but I heard nothing more."

"Why," Hopford answered, "that was more of the Agency Gang's dirty work. They invented a scandalous story, which they put up to Preston when he was in his house-boat during Henley week. The story would take too long to tell—George Blenkiron got it at first hand from the Commissioner of Police, and retailed it to me practically word for word. The upshot was that Preston would have either to abet—assisted by Miss Hagerston, whom, I see, he is to marry next week—an attempt to blackmail Mrs. Hartsilver, or himself be ruined financially, which of course would have ended his army career. Members of the gang, Blenkiron tells me the Commissioner of Police assures him, were the originators of those unwholesome rumors which, you remember, were common talk in clubland."

"But how could they ruin Preston? What had he ever done to give the gang an opening?"

“Nothing dishonorable, of course; I don’t believe he could be dishonorable if he tried. But it seems that years ago he backed two bills for a brother officer whom he looked upon as a friend. The fellow turned out to be a scoundrel; was cashiered, later became one of the gang’s ‘creatures,’ and actually faked the bills into bills for much larger amounts. And those faked bills were, if Preston refused to help in the plot against Mrs. Hartsilver—it had to do with some compromising letters she had written—to be presented for payment this month. Poor chap! No wonder he has been looking so dreadfully ill of late. It would be interesting to know how many suicides the Agency Gang has been responsible for directly and indirectly. Since that night at Henley Preston has always carried a loaded pistol in his pocket, and he vowed he would shoot that former brother officer of his dead if ever he met him again. And he would have done it, too, and have chanced the consequences.

“As for that robbery of Marietta Stringborg’s necklace at the ball at the Albert Hall, the whole thing was a bluff. The pearls were not real, and it was Stringborg himself who took them from his wife at supper and slipped them into Miss Hagerston’s bag. Jessica Mervyn-Robertson had become furious at Yootha Hagerston’s determination to find out all about her, furious, too, with Mrs. Hartsilver, and the others who were making the same attempt—she had heard about these attempts from Stothert, because Preston, Mrs. Hartsilver and Miss Hagerston

had several times consulted the Metropolitan Secret Agency—and she had made up her mind to ruin them financially and socially, and indeed that, her first attempt to disgrace Miss Hagerston, might well have been accomplished.

“Really,” he continued, “there would seem to be no end to the machinations to which the Agency Gang have had recourse within the past few years. We shall never know one-tenth of the crimes they committed or tried to commit. Several of the gang’s members were actually staying with Sir Stephen Lethbridge at his place in Cumberland, Abbey Hall, as his guests, when he shot himself. By the way, I hear that Fobart Robertson has at last been discovered, living in a garret in Lyons, and that he is being brought over to give evidence against his wife and Stapleton and others regarding the secret exportation of the Chinese drug from Shanghai long ago. He ought to prove a useful witness.”

And so the clouds which had so darkened Yootha’s and Cora’s happiness, the happiness also of Preston and of Johnson, had at last almost rolled away. The four had arranged to be married towards the end of the month, and already were busy buying *trousseaux*, acknowledging letters of congratulation and the receipt of presents, and attending to the many other matters which so engross prospective brides and bridegrooms. George Blenkiron had promised to act as best man to his life-long friend, Charles Preston, and the latter had decided to send in his papers at an early date, for, though an excellent soldier, the

monotonous life of an officer in peace time would, he knew, bore him to extinction.

Harry Hopford had asked Johnson to allow him to be his best man, "in return," as he put it, "for services rendered, and the way I helped to bring about your engagement!" Johnson suspected, and Cora knew, that Hopford himself had been greatly attracted by "the beautiful widow," as she was commonly called; and perhaps had the lad not had sense enough to realize that for him to hope to marry Cora when almost his sole source of income consisted of the salary he was paid by the newspaper to which he was attached, and the payments he received from miscellaneous other journals to which he contributed, was hopeless, he might have felt tempted to press his own suit.

True, he had once gone so far as to think the matter over seriously, carefully weighing the pros and cons, but the decision he had come to was that Cora did not care for him sufficiently to be likely to accept him even should he have the audacity to propose to her. The thought that if he did propose to her and she accepted him he would, after the marriage, be in a position to abandon his profession and live thenceforward on her income, of course, never entered his mind.

"I pity any woman who marries a journalist or a literary man," he said mentally, as he considered possibilities one night over a cigar. "We writing folk may have our good points, but I think our chronic irritability more than outweighs them, to say

nothing of our inconstancy where women are concerned, our 'sketchiness,' and our lack of mental balance. If I were a woman I would any day sooner marry a lawyer or a stockbroker than a man who earns his livelihood by his pen. Such people at any rate give their wives a sporting chance of being able to live with them in peace, whereas we news seekers and scribblers——”

He shrugged his shoulders, and smiled as he mixed himself a brandy and soda. Yet even then he could not wholly dispel from his imagination the picture of Cora Hartsilver. Suddenly his telephone rang, and he unhooked the receiver.

A fire had broken out in Smithfield and was making rapid headway—a big fire—steamers hastening to it from all directions—yes, half a column, but a column if possible—yes, not later than midnight——

He picked up his notebook and thrust it into his pocket, switched off the light and went downstairs. A taxi was passing as he reached the street, and he hailed it.

“Yes,” he said, as he passed swiftly along Oxford Street, “a journalist’s wife must have a dog’s life!”

Some days later the newspapers contained an interesting “story,” regarding a theft of diamonds some years previously in Amsterdam from a well-known diamond merchant whose place of business had then been situated in the Kalverstraat. The arrest of Archie La Planta in London in connection with the Agency Gang crimes had, it seemed, attracted the attention of the Amsterdam police, and among the

people in England with whom they had communicated was a certain Major Guysburg. Eventually, the story ran, Major Guysburg had been called upon to identify two men still residing in Amsterdam, one of whom, it then transpired, had shared lodgings with La Planta at the time of the robbery, and had now turned King's evidence, while the other had once been Alphonse Michaud's secretary. After a good deal of legal quibbling, Michaud was proved actually to have stolen stones which he had himself insured, and for which, after the robbery, he had been paid his claim in full.

On the night before their wedding—for finally Cora and Johnson and Yootha and Preston had decided to get married in London on the same day—the two happy couples with their best men, Hopford and Blenkiron, sat at supper in the grill of the Piccadilly. Not too near the band played the inevitable "Dardanella"; around them supper parties chattered and laughed loudly; waiters carrying dishes and wine hurried hither and thither as though their lives depended upon rapidity of action.

Presently the manager approached, a broad smile on his pleasant face. He came up to Preston.

"At the request of Mr. Hopford," he said, "I have just informed six officers of the Devon Regiment, who are dining in a private room upstairs, that you and these ladies and gentlemen are dining here; and on Mr. Hopford's instructions I have given them other information."

His smile widened.

"And the officers present their compliments and wish to say they hope you and your friends will join them in their room at your convenience."

"What are their names?" Preston asked.

The manager told him.

"Good heavens!" Preston exclaimed. "It's my dear old C.O., and five of the very best—we were all in France together about the time of the first attack on Thiepval. I haven't seen them since."

He turned and addressed the manager:

"Will you please say that we accept the kind invitation, and will be up shortly? Harry, you rascal, how did you find out about these officers dining here?"

"Quite by accident, when I was prowling in search of news this morning. My first idea was to look up your old C.O. at once. Then I decided it would be better, because less formal, if I sprang the news on him to-night, while they were at dinner, that you were to be married to-morrow, and that we were all here to-night. I knew they would be glad to see you again."

He looked at Yootha.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked, for she was suddenly looking sad.

"Nothing at all," she replied with a forced smile, though her moist eyes belied her words. "I was thinking of my brothers, both still in Mesopotamia, and apparently likely to remain there. I have not seen either for over two years, and to-night I feel a long-

ing to have them here. Their presence would complete my happiness."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Hopford answered with twinkling eyes. "News came through to the office this evening, just as I was leaving, that your brothers' regiment has been ordered home, so probably you will find your brothers awaiting you on your return to London from your honeymoon unless," he smiled mischievously, "they go direct to Cumberland to stay with your father and your step-mother!"

THE END.

